

THE FIFTH HORSEMAN
The Apocalypse Trilogy: Book Three
G. Wells Taylor

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Cover Design by G. Wells Taylor

For Mary and Frank

Thanks for the front row seat.

1 – The Cabin

The green lizards watched the approaching Rider from a hole in the crumbling sandstone foundation of what used to be a settler's cabin. They had just scampered in ahead of the sun's first rays. With luck the cool dry shade would keep them alive for another day. A long night of hunting had scared up little for the hungry pair—a white-ringed moth, a mouthful of fly larvae. Moments before, they had quarreled over and devoured a shiny brown scorpion.

The desert kept them close to starvation and they were always on the watch for food, so their quick yellow eyes were instantly drawn to the distant motion. The thin black line leapt out at them, a twitchy needle of shadow against the shimmering orange dawn. One of the lizards *chirruped*, raised its tail. The other chased an ant.

A man rode up the rocky shelf that sloped toward the cabin. The gray coating of dust and fine patina of salt from endless days in the arid Savagelands obscured the true color of both horse and Rider. Reining in his mount, the man paused a moment, bent forward in the saddle to study the ground. He raised his hat brim with a thumb then jerked back into motion, angling his horse toward a low stone wall that circled an old well. Dust rose from each weary hoof.

At the edge of the well, the Rider halted with a snap of the reins.

Something—a sound, a sudden burst of air, had traveled through the cabin's pine door. A cough perhaps, severe—exploding from lungs painful and tubercular.

He dismounted slowly, drawing one of his guns and pulling the hammer back. His spurs clinked as he walked toward the structure. The door was open a crack. The Rider

hesitated, staring into the dark gap, before he set a hand against the pine planking, and pushed the door aside.

Sheltering his heart with the doorjamb he peered into the darkness.

The cabin's poor construction allowed many thin lines of light to burn through cracks in its walls. The effect dazzled his vision and obscured the room within. A dangerous millisecond passed as his eyes adjusted.

The Rider stepped in, gun level.

A man was propped in the far corner. The silhouette pushed itself upright, wheezing.

"Are you the man?" The voice was husky and wet. An oily crackle in the lungs foretold his death.

"Some say," the Rider rasped, features clouded. His eyes squinted against the glare, then flared in recognition. "I know you..."

"Horseman!" Another voice as dry and dead as bleached bone rattled behind the door.

The first gunshot drove the green lizards from the relative coolness beneath the cabin. Reckless with terror, one was snatched up in the talons of a starving hawk. The other got away.

2 – The Storm

Corrie Orchard had seen a lot of things out in the Territory, but never anything like this. The approaching storm carried clouds on its back that were blacker than pigshit after sunset. The foul weather crossed the plain on crackling claws of lightning that ripped at the earth so hard she could feel it through her boots. The flashing strokes left glowing green stripes across her vision for minutes after.

There was no taste of rain on the wind, just the hot smell of ozone.

It wasn't a total surprise. There'd been a growing sense of urgency in her since the day before. A sharp, dry expectation had hung in the early summer air that got no release from the setting sun. There'd been a stillness that tightened up the muscles in her shoulders and robbed her of even the troublesome sleep she managed these days. When she awoke that morning to find the tension waiting, she started to guess there was a change of weather on the way.

It wasn't just Corrie either. Her parents had flown into an argument over the breakfast table, and her oldest brothers cursed and threw punches while saddling their skittish horses.

Something was in the air.

But this storm made no sense. There was no dark haze of rain slung under the clouds, just heat rippling in the blue distance distorting the rolling plains. With that much flash and bluster a downpour had to be coming.

It was spooky.

Corrie pushed the thoughts from her mind. There wasn't time for fretting with the storm galloping across the prairie, pulling fiery black clouds toward the farm.

She closed the shutters on the henhouse and barred up the shed before pausing by the open barn doors. A glance at the sky went with the thought of twisters, but the approaching mass of darkness lacked the telltale finger clouds.

Well what in hell then? She ran into the barn to grab some lamp oil before closing the doors. Back outside, the ominous black clouds held her again—mesmerized.

Her father and brothers were out along the northern line of the Orchard Farm toward Treeharveston, checking the pear trees planted at the foot of the mountains. So there was no chance that they'd return and help with the closing up. The ride home would bring them near supper on a good day, and this strange weather had run up all of a sudden. It was just too fast and too snarly to risk a lightning bolt on the way home.

Corrie knew her father would find a sheltered place.

She cradled the can of lamp oil and hurried across the yard toward the house. Her mother had finished shuttering the many windows, so it would be dark and scary in there—they'd need the lamps.

A powerful gust of wind pulled on her long dress as she ran and almost tripped her—spun her around to face the south.

Face the south like she did every night thinking of...

And her mind settled on her Joe down there with the Red Rider troop. He'd be right in the teeth of that storm.

But just as quickly, she let the thought go. Corrie already worried enough about the man, and he'd made his choice. He wasn't stupid, just selfish—and being south of her, the trouble would already be past for him. Her anger fizzled out when a northward gust blinded her with sand.

She hugged the lamp oil against her belly and staggered to the house.

Corrie had never seen the like. But if it wasn't twisters, then what? Childhood stories of the old times clutched at her heart. She'd heard the legends about fire rains and rocket-ghosts, the lepersickness and flesh-eating diseases.

Go to ground girl!

Shoving the front door aside and slamming it shut against the rushing winds, Corrie turned and snapped her fingers at her own recklessness.

Momma!

Her mother sat motionless on the stairs: a shovel gripped tight in one hand and a candle in the other. The funniest part was, she had managed to do that while keeping all her fingers crossed. If her expression hadn't been so terrified, Corrie might have laughed.

"Don't worry, Momma." She latched the door. "Just an old storm. We'll have us a little tea party to while away the time."

Corrie set the lamp oil on the floor and crossed to her mother, slipping an arm around the trembling shoulders as she took a seat on the step. The flickering orange candlelight revealed worry on the older woman's face.

Corrie patted her cheek recognizing the fret. "Daddy will be fine," she said, eyes rolling toward the ceiling as her own fingers crossed.

Her stomach cramped with fear as thunder boomed.

Here it comes!

The storm started tearing at the roof like a hungry animal.

3 – PANDORA CITY: The Rider

The five-legged cur dog called the main street meeting to order by barking itself breathless. The townsfolk broke from their daily duties to gather across from Horace Skinker's Saloon, Pandora City's least reputable and therefore most successful drinking and dining establishment. They blinked up at the noonday sun, still skittish about the violent storm that had shaken the streets the day before. It had come out of the southeast and charged north, but dropped no rain, so gave no relief from the heat.

Its fierceness had left everyone on edge.

The dog drew their attention back across the wagon ruts to a Rider pulled up to the hitching rail in front of the saloon. The cur had met him coming from the south end of town, and was putting up an annoying fuss around his horse's hooves—though the mount seemed either too tired, or too stupid to care.

The Rider had no choice but to visit.

Pandora City was a town of just a few buildings set in the hollow between two unremarkable hills. It boasted a church on the eastern hilltop and a schoolhouse on the other. Spilling out from between these humble promontories was a blacksmith and a barbershop and more than one saloon—not to mention a couple hotels and boarding houses, hardware suppliers, a general store and homes. There wouldn't have been a point to any of it except the lay of the land put them right on the cattle trail. The town was not much more than a crossroads, really, grown up around a meeting place of herds.

And it was only a meeting place because it was easier to drive a cow between the hills than over or around them. There was water there too. An underground spring fed the town's many wells in a place that seldom got more than a foot of rain each year. So there were a number of coincidences that sent anything going north or south right through the middle of town.

People still wondered if that was good luck or bad.

The strange Rider had to be wondering about that too.

Any courageous cattleman making the terrible journey south across the Savagelands toward the Greenbelt and the sea could dust his pants off in front of Skinker's Saloon going and coming. Horace made his living by the baked sand flats to the south and he was one of the few men in the Territory who actually took some comfort in its parched air and withering sun. He never made a spectacle of himself but more than a few cowboys joked that after sweeping up he always emptied his dustpans toward the south.

Horace would have known that the Savagelands needed no such offering. There was enough sand and heat to last until kingdom come. The great desert flats ran south for 160 miles and offered little in the way of shade but cactus and rocks. And the nights could bring frost to a man's whiskers be he dead or alive. So, they were only brave men who would cross the sands and chance its hostile weather in search of wild cattle.

And there was more.

Cowboys came in to town with tales of night creatures sneaking off with cattle and leaving no sign of their passage. And there were stories about strange noises under the cold black skies that sent men shivering to their blankets with an eye on the shadows and a hand on their guns. The more sensible among them blamed the sounds and the rustling on the tricks of the Savages—people of the Wild Path for whom the lands were named. But scouts occasionally found tracks that belonged to neither man, nor recollected beast.

And there were other things as well.

Back in Horace Skinker's Saloon, right over the bar and the picture of Sally Blisters, was a curious artifact dragged in by a bewildered cowboy who counted himself the sole survivor of old Mathew Herder's lost drive. He claimed to have found and roped it during his month-long wander in the wilderness, before hauling it north and trading it for a bottle of whiskey.

Dubbed *Big Skull Head* by the local patrons, it looked like a normal man's skull, though twice the size, with a pair of long sharp horns growing from the forehead that would have shamed the biggest longhorn bull in the Territory. Most visitors to Skinker's Saloon dismissed it as a gimmick of woodcarving and nails brought about by Horace's insatiable desire for business and his showman's eye.

Most just kept *their* eyes clear of it until they'd had enough whiskey to chase away their fears. Everyone wanted to discount the mystery as a trick; but its authenticity was propped up by scouts and wanderers visiting the saloon and recollecting seeing other bones like Big Skull Head, protruding in pieces from the sands and baked rock of the Savagelands.

But, there was not one cattleman worth his salt that would let such rumors keep him from crossing those dangerous miles because the prize on the other side was so great.

At the far edge of the Savagelands was a long green strip of grassland about a hundred miles across that stretched farther east and west than any had ever dared to explore. Bound on its southern border by the sea, the Greenbelt, as it was called, was home to vast herds of wild cattle, horses and buffaloes.

These herds thundered east and west along the grassy belt as the seasons dictated—annually grazing themselves from poverty into prosperity and back again. But cattlemen made the journey and rounded up great herds to drive north. And timed right, an outfit could be sure to have a large population of *springers* in the herd ready to drop their calves within a month of returning home. The Greenbelt stock they wrangled was of a more fertile kind than the poor hooped animals bred on farms in the Territory.

The local animals that *could* conceive dropped deformed and dying offspring.

But not in the Greenbelt.

Whatever was in the grass or air down there caused the wild cattle and horse herds to breed like rabbits and breed true. The Territory's dependence upon these animals created a lively market for them. Beef and horseflesh fetched a high price per head up in Babylon City, the capitol, some 120 miles north of Pandora.

Sadly, though the cattlemen would say different, the new stock grew infertile a year or so after its arrival in the Territory and in time had to be replaced. So the demand for these foreign animals was constant though many believed breeding this healthy stock with the local variety would eventually release the towns from their reliance on the Greenbelt.

A fortune could be earned, though many said that the word 'earned' did not quite describe it, and that another more satisfactory term would have to be created since crossing the Savagelands was the most dangerous task a fool could undertake.

Currently, the locals were waiting for Sticky Pickard's giant Ironmine Outfit, overdue now and in the possession of almost every cowboy fit to make the crossing.

So the Pandorans gathered in the street wondered if the strange Rider might be one of them—riding point on the herd, perhaps; but none could recognize his face.

He looked like any one of the saddle tramps that rode through town on their way from nowhere to nowhere better. They could be trouble on their own accounts, once they spent their trail pay and seed on whiskey and whores, or gambled away everything they owned—including pecker-rot. And the town jailhouse had known almost every cowboy who rode the Territory.

Everyone knew there were deadly gunfighters who traveled from town to town gambling and causing trouble or visiting hideouts in the Savagelands; but Pandora City had not seen the like since Black Peter met his end the summer past. He hadn't turned out to be much of a gunfighter really. The former trapper had tried to rob the dentist and poor Bill Puller had settled the business with a shotgun blast to Peter's face. Afterwards, Puller was saddened to discover that the one bullet in Black Peter's gun was rusted solidly into place.

Not *fairplay* at all, but forgivable considering the situation.

But this new fellow, he didn't look like much. The weary way he hung low over his saddle horn, grizzled beard whiskers almost dusting his mount's dirty mane, gave him the look of a man more likely to fill a grave than a jail cell. He had broad shoulders that would have been impressive if they didn't droop so, sloping roundly down to long arms that protruded from his riding cloak and terminated at a pair of fists that were wrapped in the horse's reins.

The dark hat hid the rest of his face from the street-side meeting.

The locals were all focused on the well-worn walnut handles on the pair of big iron pistols that jutted from under his cloak. That on its own meant little, until it was added to the weary way the horse and Rider moved. There was a haggard quality to both that spoke of desperation and extremity. It was clear that anyone this close to death was unlikely to scruple about who he brought with him to Hell.

The Rider sat there in front of the saloon for a full minute, head tilted forward and down, like he was studying his horse's ears. The dog that had been barking and dancing around its hooves the whole time suddenly yelped, then put all five paws to work and ran right out of town.

The Rider pulled a long leg over his saddle, dropped his foot to the ground, then tugged the other worn boot from its stirrup. He stood there another minute, leaning on his horse; forehead pressed against its shoulder as his hands blindly freed themselves from the tangle of reins.

Then the Rider's hat jerked up, and a dark-green eye blazed from under its brim at the people that crowded across the street. He hissed, and snatched a dusty pistol out of its holster, but it swung in his grip as the gathering cried out as if with one voice...

The weight of the weapon was too much. The Rider snarled a curse, and fell after the gun onto the rutted street.

4 – The Walker in the Wastes

Vultures drifted over the Walker in a slow and lazy spiral. Twenty-three in the flock, they were in no hurry. Silently riding the updrafts, they could see the shimmering distance of heat, dry grass and sand that the injured man could never be able to cross. They smelled the blood that had dried on his wounded chest and caked his clothes. It had

brought them from miles away, from the craggy cliffs where they'd sheltered from the fast-moving storm the previous morning.

Far below, the Walker called out for his horse again, but he understood now that the Rider had scared it off. There was no knowing how long the beast would be gone or if it could return at all. The storm that followed the fight had spurred it on with thunder and lightning flash, no doubt.

No, the beast has to return—there was no other outcome, but it had never met the Rider before—someone so different.

Growling at his pain, the Walker pulled his hat low against the sun's burning glare and stumbled on. He could feel the big bullets in his heart and lungs. His ribs were smashed around his mangled sternum. The lead shot tore at the delicate internal tissues and every time he breathed, dark red bubbled from his chest and drooled down the front of his tattered shirt and denims.

He had walked for a day and night and was coming to the end of his strength.

His choice of direction might have been his undoing. True, allies were in the East Peaks past Dry Lake and the Dead Rivers, but the distance would challenge a healthy man on horseback.

Not thinking straight.

The Walker had been injured before, but never this badly. He was the fastest gun in the Territory, yet he had been caught. Now, with his boots full of blood he had to deal with the complicated notion of his own mortality. It had never entered his mind before.

But he had never squared off against the Rider.

Someone so fast.

And the Walker had been overconfident.

He paused, vision swimming, as he struggled for breath. Then he laughed.

Part of an ancient song burst past his cracked lips.

Darkness pulled him down.

He awoke to the hot weight of the sun scorching his cheeks. The Walker opened his eyes, and screamed at the vulture that clutched his breast with a talon and ripped at his ugly black wounds with its beak. Pushing the bird aside, he rolled over, head swimming. Precious body fluids spilled into the sand.

The vulture squawked, then hopped in its stiff-legged way to join its brethren that moved in a noisy, slowly closing circle.

The Walker's tongue was swollen. His eyes grated in their sockets.

Thirsty.

Pity the storm had brought no rain. Had it come to cover the Rider's escape?

No matter.

A different song, a fragment in an old language spilled from his parched mouth.

Miraculously, the Walker got a knee up under him and with enormous effort struggled swaying to his feet. Smiling at the birds in horrible triumph he stepped forward and collapsed.

Immediately, the dry sand sucked more moisture from his chest—like the earth itself was drinking his blood, anxious to finish him. With great effort he rolled himself over, flipped his torn underbelly away from the ground only to catch the hard stare of the sun. Unrelenting in its desire to kill him, its rays lashed his face like a bullwhip.

Thirsty.

He needed help. His mount would not return in time and he would die. He couldn't let that happen, with victory so near.

But his closest allies were deaf to entreaty, only in their dreams could they hear him. He would have to take matters into his own hands.

The Walker started squirming in the sand and loose earth, scooping and kicking it out from under him, to form a depression—a shallow grave. In fits and starts he struggled with the last of his strength. When his torso and legs arched down into the relative coolness, he used his numb arms to drag the dirt back over himself to cover his mangled chest.

A coughing fit shook him as sand filled his chest wounds and thickened the blood that dribbled over his chin.

He was dying.

The Walker laughed at the irony.

He turned his head and caught the eye of the biggest vulture—the one with scraps of his flesh still stuck to its hooked beak. Its ugly yellow-ringed pupils contracted instantly and it squawked.

The big body shuddered. The bird's broad feathers vibrated on outstretched wings and its large carrion claws raked the sand. A long screech burst from its gullet, and a hiss.

A final shiver ruffled its feathers.

Then the bird folded its wings and hopped forward, naked red head tilted down studying the Walker's half-buried body. Its eyes blinked intelligently, surveying the scene. The Walker's head was exposed; hands and feet were splayed up out of the mound.

The other vultures hopped forward eagerly, their sharp beaks shining, but the larger vulture raised its wings and threw its head back with a hoarse call.

And the other birds fell dead.

Finishing a quick meal of one of its brethren, the remaining vulture cast a final knowing glance at the Walker's body, then beating its wings and rising, the bird flapped slowly toward the north.

5 – Wounded

About 25 people had gathered on Pandora City's main street to cast a large anxious shadow over the unconscious Rider. He was on his back in the afternoon sun; the slow rise and fall of his chest the only sign that he lived. His big gun had hit the dirt and bounced a few feet away from his scarred right palm. The other pistol jutted out from under him at an awkward angle.

Someone in the throng said, "Sheriff."

Someone else said, "John Doctor."

A third counseled, "Jail" and another anonymously whispered, "*Hang him.*"

"We shouldn't involve ourselves," Martin Stone chimed in quickly, stepping forward and back, wringing his hairy hands. "This is Judd's job..."

That idea brought a few chuckles from the gathering.

The thought of Sheriff Judd Elliot handling this tall Rider, even near death, seemed a stretch. Everything that the sheriff was in the way of a gunslinger this unconscious fellow looked like he could fit into one boot.

True, the sheriff hadn't always been that way. There was a time he rode with the Red Riders, but he had slipped some in his years of public service for Pandora City. That fact partnered with every able-bodied man being away with the Ironmine Outfit provoked more nervous laughter than mockery.

Seemed the trail boss, Sticky Pickard, had the notion to combine a number of cattle outfits to form a single company that could drive the biggest herd ever rounded up.

Such a notion promised riches for Sticky, and a boom for Pandora City when the giant herd was processed in the Yards that spread out on the south end of Main Street. A few of Pandora's wealthiest citizens had parents with the foresight to prepare large barns and huge corrals for branding the livestock and breaking the horses before they were driven north to market.

So until the Ironmine Outfit got back, the town was left short-handed and that meant Sheriff Judd Elliot was the man they were to look to in times of trouble.

And that was never an easy swallow.

Evelyn Teacher looked at Martin Stone and shook her head. How such a powerfully built man, with such a demanding and physical trade, could be such a little crybaby, she would never know. Miss Teacher only understood that his remark had delivered the fence-builder to the lowest position on her list of possible suitors.

"Don't worry, Martin. You needn't involve *yourself*." She watched his milky blue eyes pale further. "And what do you mean by 'Judd's job?' We all know our sheriff's often as deserving to be in his jail as the people he puts there."

A hot flush colored her cheeks when the men in the gathering fired stern looks at her. None would debate her thoughts on Judd, but few of them liked her straightforward ways. She was a woman, and worst of all an educated one, so they often regarded her with a suspicion bordering on the supernatural. Many stories blamed female emancipation for all the trouble that happened so long ago.

Then, though it pained her to do so, Evelyn added: "As the Preacher said, 'Who can expect Christian kindness that does not give it?'" She was reluctant to quote the holy man because of his stance on modern education. They had spent most of the last three years at odds.

But before anyone could respond, the dilemma was settled for them. John Doctor shouted something from up the street where he and his son, Hank, were loading spools of wire on a wagon in front of Hardware's Equipment Company.

A question, a salutation, echoed back along the street before John himself followed the sound up to the gathering.

"What have we here?" His black skin shone in the scorching sun as he approached. Keeping a wary eye on the man's guns, Doctor knelt over the stricken Rider and probed the fellow's bloodstained clothes.

"Miss Teacher," he said finally, peering up over his spectacles. "Appears this fellow is gutshot." He leaned in, gingerly pulling the stranger's filthy riding cloak and coat aside with a thumb and forefinger.

"In the left side..." Doctor grunted, rubbed his chin, and then nodded as his son joined the gathering. "This ain't good." He looked past Stone, then over to Samuel Farmer.

Farmer was a big man in his late thirties. He grew wheat with his family of ten on a farm five miles northwest of town. Only one of his offspring had suffered the curse, and was born with an extra arm and hand—not something his father considered a handicap on a busy farm.

“Samuel?” Doctor said. “Martin? Help me with this man.”

Evelyn Teacher noticed that while Samuel Farmer shrugged his heavy shoulders and stepped forward, Martin Stone lagged—his eyes looking for escape as he twisted his thick fingers together.

John Doctor ignored it. Stone had been a chicken his whole life.

“You boys grab his arms.” Doctor positioned himself at the Rider’s head as the volunteers knelt on either side and gripped the man’s lean wrists. “He *might* live if we help him now. First I’ll throw that other big gun aside. I don’t want him waking up and putting a hole in anyone. Hold him steady.” He yanked the pistol out of the man’s holster and set it in the dirt by the other.

Then Doctor pulled off the man’s hat and tossed it aside.

Little Johnnie Post yelped, then knelt by the hat and pointed with one of the seven fingers on his left hand.

“There’s nickels on it!” he blurted, as a handful of kids clustered around him.

Others leaned in to see a hatband woven of leather, porcupine quills and horn, set with seven silver coins. The material had a *Savage*-look to it. The hat itself used to be black, but was worn and sweated many shades of gray.

As Doctor continued his examination, Horace Skinker walked out onto the porch of his saloon. He’d been upstairs enjoying the services of Maria Puta when the commotion began but an arrangement he had with the whore would not allow any disruption once the finer points of the transaction had commenced—and she was a stickler for the finer points.

In truth, he’d hesitated in her room after glancing at the gathering crowd because his first notion had been that the Pandora City Temperance League was forming up for another series of hymns and speeches on vice. Though they could stir up the social conscience with their songs, badges and ribbons, the ladies’ lectures on purity and chastity generally sharpened the thirst, especially when screamed within earshot of the closest saloon.

Skinker peered over the shoulders of Stone and Farmer, narrow forehead furrowing under dark curly hair.

“Who shot him?” he asked, and was *hushed*. His shrill voice had been the cause of many a cowboy’s next drink.

The strange Rider was barely breathing.

After probing the matted brown-gray hair on the man’s scalp, John Doctor pulled his bloody shirt aside to examine the wound with his fingertips, alternately hissing and clicking his tongue. Finally, he stood up.

“Nobody can kiss that and make it better,” he grunted. “Not gutshot, neither. Looks more like a spear or a big knife’s been stuck in him and pulled out—could have been one of them damn Savages... I’d say Irawk or Apa by the shape of it. Didn’t get the bleeder vein though, good for him. But he’s shed a lot of blood just the same.” He looked around the familiar faces, absently wiping his hands on his pants. “Anybody know him?”

Silence answered Doctor. The gathering was coming to terms with what he had just said about Savages, and some of the locals wondered again if the strange Rider wasn't from the Ironmine Outfit and if like him, the others had run afoul of Savage attack. Sticky's crew was already late.

Everyone knew the Savagelands held plenty of dangers: wild bears, cougars and dog packs—not to mention the mystery of the night creatures. But most terrifying to everyone were the Savage tribes, wild men who lived in secret places in the desert and mountains that bordered the Territory and Greenbelt, chased down that way and all but exterminated by the Red Riders during the First Expansion.

But some Savages had survived, and everyone knew of at least one cattle outfit that had failed to return and left no trace.

Evelyn Teacher was the first to recover her courage. She stepped forward and set her palm on Doctor's forearm.

"He only just rode into town, John Doctor," she said.

Doctor's lips flared in a frustrated grin. "Well, it's *something* to carve on his tombstone when he dies." He frowned. Infection killed most folks with injuries to the guts and chest. And his mercury fix was not 100 percent. A dirty Savage spear usually meant death.

"I guess it wouldn't be fairplay if we didn't try to save him or at least make him comfortable for his final hours," Doctor relented. "Or 'unchristian' as the Preacher would scold come Sunday. Though I'd be open to hearing his opinion just the same." Everyone knew that the Preacher was out of town on a pilgrimage.

Doctor looked at the Rider's horse. Blood stained the saddle and had followed the cinch strap down onto the animal's underbelly.

Then he glanced at Skinker's Saloon. "I expect he was headed here anyway—and by his look dying at a drinking hole would fit into his bedtime story. It's as good a place as any to wash his wounds." He pointed. "I see his horse could use some water and feed. It don't look more than tired. Samuel Farmer, would you tend to the beast after you help us get its unfortunate Master out of the sun?"

The big farmer nodded his head, and then glared Martin Stone back into position. The fence-builder had been fixing to *Georgie Porgie* down the street. The pair of them lifted the unconscious Rider by his arms and legs and carried him up the steps of the saloon ahead of John Doctor.

But Horace Skinker headed them off at the top.

"Hold it there now! Where you going? This is a saloon and ain't no place for Christian kindness. Not that it ain't a good place." Skinker looked the wounded man over. "Who's going to tend him? And who'll do his washing up?"

Doctor glowered. "I'll care for him, Skinker. It's in my hypnotic oath and goes without saying. My boy, Hank, will help with the washing up since he hopes to take up the doctor-trade one day."

Skinker continued, "And *rent*. I don't run no place for charity."

"I'll see that Preacher tends to that from the collection plate," Miss Teacher promised, though she doubted her poor relationship with the holy man was any guarantee. "If the Rider lives and an extended stay is required."

Skinker paused a moment more, until something clicked. His eyes blinked, and then a smile passed over his face as he turned to usher them into the building. "It's only fairplay,

Doctor. Just in luck I got a couple rooms open—with two of my whores run off and married to Babylon as they do.”

Doctor turned and told his son to collect the Rider’s guns and hurry along after to “learn a thing or two.” Evelyn Teacher followed with a good number of the townspeople in tow.

Life was hard in Pandora City and making a living in the lands surrounding it almost claimed as many lives as it supported, so any diversion was bound to take the whole population by storm. It had been a good while since the last cattle drive had come through, and there was one overdue, so there had been little in the way of entertainment of late. Even bad news was exciting, especially when it happened to a stranger.

A group of kids that gathered close to the Rider’s horse had worked up the nerve to reach out and stroke at its dusty flanks.

“Hey,” cried little Johnnie Post, “it’s a white horse underneath!”

6 – Sheriff of Pandora City

“But don’t you think it makes sense, Sheriff?” Boto asked from the shadow of his cell; it was the closest of the three. The daylight burned fine lines around the heavy shutter in the front window. The bars in the side and rear windows drew stripes on the drawn curtains. “Don’t you think the old stories are true? About the flying coaches and such?”

Sheriff Judd Elliot looked wearily over the rim of his steel coffee mug and yawned. The action dragged the trailing ends of his long moustache out of the brew and left them dripping, the white whiskers stained orange.

Boto talked too much.

And he especially talked too much to Judd.

All night he did it, and started up again after Becky Cedarbow woke them early that morning when she brought breakfast. An arrangement with the Halladay Inn next door supplied the jailhouse residents with daily meals.

Judd had heard more of Boto’s talk than any guilty man should ever have to bear.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair dabbing at his moustache with a shirtsleeve. His boots were crossed on the desk. He was starting to feel hungry again.

“I liked you better when you was a hermit,” the sheriff drawled.

Boto chuckled. “You don’t know what you’re missing.” He snorted. “I can’t take it like I used to.” The prisoner laughed again. “Because I *do* remember. That’s why I get stirred up.”

“The only thing I ever seen that stirred you up was standing by the open end of a whiskey bottle.” The sheriff paused to enjoy his own jest. Judd generally was of a serious frame of mind, and preferred his levity dim and shadowy; but there was something about Boto’s social status that made his inhibitions relax a little.

“Now do *you* suppose you could quiet down and drink your coffee. You talked nearly all night.” Judd climbed wearily from his chair, walked to the potbelly stove in the center of the room. He stared at the steaming coffeepot, decided against another mug.

The sheriff glanced at the door.

The day was waiting.

But he'd managed to sleep part of the morning while Boto slept off the last of the night's drink.

He'd managed to avoid half the day.

"You were talking *too*, Sheriff," the little man said and laughed.

Sheriff Judd grunted.

It was true. He was often drawn in by Boto's ravings of other times and the legends from the terrible and distant past, if for no other reason than because life in Pandora City was duller than ditch water—and *that* usually led the sheriff to drink if he wasn't careful.

Judd was 57 years of age; almost *ancient* by Territory standards and patrolling the dirty streets collecting drunken cowboys had grown weary on him. After all, he had served with the Red Riders and won a medal in the Last Expansion. By God, he led the retreat when Fort Gregory fell—saved a hundred men.

And lost a hundred more...

Judd frowned at the recollection. That was the thing about the past. It never just flipped one way. Failure was always waiting on the other side of the coin.

His time with the Red Riders was over 30 years gone, and the glories little more than memories replayed—though they had won him the job of Pandora City's sheriff.

The time in between had been hard to fill.

And the memories harder to forget.

The only proof of better days hung on the wall behind his desk. Tarnished now, it was the longcat he'd worn while sharing command of a troop in the *Riders*. He'd been quite handy with the double-bladed weapon, and had used it to turn or break many a Savage lance—not to mention the Savage souls he'd sent to Hell soon after. Though the weapon's steel basket hilt was dented and in need of a polish, he'd never traded the longcat for whiskey or debt—marking one of the few times he'd resisted temptation.

Judd frowned, thinking of the Red Rider troop that garrisoned in Pandora and had left on an eastern course a few days past. Captain Barnstable had been in the lead. Judd knew the man when he was a private of little use—a shirker and scaredy-cat.

How that slug got to be Captain...

But Boto's talk dragged him out of the recollection. The little dark-skinned hermit was sliding into a long tale about a great desert war.

Here we go again.

There were times the hermit's stories gave the sheriff a feeling similar to what he experienced while at church during his dry periods.

Familiar, he reckoned.

The Preacher would go on about angels and saints and devils and that kind of thing, roaming chaps with golden single-bladed longcats, sometimes in little wagons called *chariots*—from back before God got himself killed in the big shootout. Judd struggled with his feelings at such times because the stories sounded like half-remembered tunes pounded out on the piano down at Skinker's Saloon.

He felt then what he often felt when peering into the past—and it was why he held such mixed feelings for Boto. The bastard got *him* stirred up too, took him to mental mazes of familiar ideas that got him thirsting for more or drink. Then a shadow would pass across his mind like hate or guilt or shame, as the madman chattered and chattered and chattered.

“Just shut up yer face for once!” Judd growled, walking away from the stove and grabbing his hat from a peg by the door. He pushed his long gray and blond hair away from his forehead and stuffed the hat over it.

“But, Sheriff...” the hermit started.

Judd silenced Boto’s plea with a slam of the jailhouse door.

He stepped out onto the porch where the planks butted up against the building, then walked to the edge and hung his toes over the dusty street. A glance skyward showed a steady throbbing blue—cloudless. *Another hot day in Pandora.* Barely summer, and the sun was already beating and whipping the streets until folks ran indoors for shelter.

The sheriff had to thank Sticky Pickard for the last couple months of easy work. Taking all the cowboys off his hands and dragging them south left little in the way of law-breakers to deal with. And there was no worry from robbers and bandits. With the dry spell and long time between herds, the Territorial Bank counter at the stagecoach office was closed up pending the Ironmine Outfit’s return. Since no one could afford a loan, and the ready cash was already out in circulation, there was no point in keeping a clerk on hand.

Judd glanced back at the stagecoach office where it was tucked in beside the jailhouse, before he squinted across the street at a sign in the window of Puller’s Dental. “Haircut and tooth removal \$1.00.”

On the right, the apothecary windows were shuttered; though the door was open a crack.

And on Puller’s left, bread, buns and pies showed where Ann Baker had set them in the window to cool.

Even as his senses yearned for the smell of sweets and bread, Boto’s chatter continued to rattle against the door.

“Damn it,” Judd cursed the open street in front of him, then cast a glance at the jailhouse door and the hermit still gumming beyond it. “He’ll talk till his jaw breaks off...”

Judd had to get away—had to have quiet. The madman’s delusions were infectious, and all the fevered talk echoed in his own head. *Why does that horseshit get me going?*

Boto’s droning got the sheriff thinking, and thinking made him thirsty.

Or do you just need an excuse?

Many a night upon finding the madman drunk, Judd had chosen to leave him to sleep off his liquor in an alley or doorway rather than be subjected to his ramblings at the jailhouse. But often, as was the case last night, Judd was moved to pity the hermit.

If he ain’t brimming with drink, he’s full of sorrow.

The sheriff regretted his kindness now—like he always did—too late. The night had passed, and the talk had left him thirsty.

Judd looked south down the wagon-rutted street toward Skinker’s Saloon. A touch of tequila would be just the thing for his nerves, and tequila never made him loco like whiskey did. But the sight of something throttled the urge.

A crowd had gathered on the steps of the saloon.

“Well, what in hell?” He dropped a hand to his gun belt—then flinched away with embarrassment. The town had bought him a pair of .45 revolvers for keeping the peace, but five years ago, the sheriff had returned from a drinking binge in Plentyboats without

them, having lost the guns in a poker game. When he sobered up, he had been forced to borrow money to replace them with a pair of rust-pitted and poorly used .38's.

Mayor Pauley had made him a personal loan of the money for better guns, but the sheriff had used some of the cash to settle up his bill at the saloon and the stagecoach livery stable too. No one ever spoke to him about the incident, but he knew by their looks that word had got out, and worse, the cheap replacement guns drew attention to themselves by rattling when he walked.

Still, Judd was insulated from the scorn.

You think I'm worthless, he'd say to himself.

Imagine how I rate to me.

With a rare stroke of luck, for the sheriff anyway, Mayor Pauley choked to death eating ribs at the annual Ghost Girl Roundup not one week after Judd had borrowed the money. That cleared his debt but also left the sheriff as provisional leader of the town until an election could be called. They'd already been waiting five years for the go ahead from the Judge at Babylon City, and the Judge was always busy running the Territory.

So...

Casually, Judd pulled the ring of keys from his belt, opened the door and tossed them into the jailhouse where they clanged against the bars of Boto's cell.

"You let yourself out, soon as you ain't a threat to the public no more." Judd watched the crowd down by the saloon. "Empty your chamberpot and leave the keys on the desk."

He pulled the door shut with a bang, walked out of the shadow of the porch roof and into the sun's heat. Adjusting his hat, he tried to steel what frazzled nerves his sleepless night had left him.

Judd just had to get by their first looks: all those frowning faces and rolling eyes. It was always the first look that threw him.

That look always said: "Well, is he drunk today?"

A shudder ran through him as he crossed the street toward the saloon—the dirt shifted beneath his old boots.

7 – BABYLON CITY: The Savage

Al-geran was a simple Savage of normal height. His hands were strong from hard work, and his back was burnt black by the sun. The air was thick and fresh about him as he raked at the rows of earth. A scent came from the sun-warmed soil and brought a smile to his lips.

The elders in his tribe said the sun had been released from its cloudy prison long ago with the death of the old god, and so its rays freed the life of the land as *it* was freed. The sun pulled the shoots loose from the dirt, and dragged the blades and stalks after. He did not know much about the times before his life, but things had changed they said and that was good.

Al-geran grew wheat in the field on the rise by the mountain river, and cotton past the line of broad-leafed oaks. His wife made the wheat into food that he ate and spun the cotton into shirts that he wore and leggings that she decorated and dyed for trading.

His rake *clanged* and shivered in his hands when its blade struck the edge of a hard square stone. He knelt to pull the block loose and turn it over in his calloused hands. His eyes squeezed around a memory.

Was it a city? A road? A palace dead beneath this plot of ground?

No one in the village could remember the days before Old Solomon led the people out of darkness and onto the Wild Path. But it was said that some few of the old ones from that time still lived, ancient and cursed where they hid in their holes beneath the Savagelands or in the ruined cities by the sea.

Legend said that once far past the East Peaks, a giant city grew into the sky on the back of the ocean—a city made for the god that was dead. These stories had crossed the land like birds, and as a boy Al-geran had listened to their songs.

He grew up in a village north of the Inland Sea, where the Western Mountain plateau turned to rolling grasslands. There his people grew corn and wheat on land hidden from the world.

When the people of the towns had come to claim the water and the land around it, Al-geran's tribe followed the Wild Path into the north, for why invite war when land was plentiful and people so few?

And they made new farms in the farthest places.

And they made no war, for they had learned from war.

Al-geran learned stories of the times before from someone who claimed he was there.

It was a secret he kept from his brothers and sisters but an *old one* of legend lived in shaggy green mountains a half-day's run from the new village. Al-geran had stumbled upon the strange creature by a stream one day while chasing deer over twisted roots.

At first he was afraid, but something of the old one's movements and manners kept him calm. This thing was older than the trees it seemed—for it was made of old oily ropes, twisted over and over, and wrapped in skin like dried split leather.

Cursed, as the elders had said.

But this one spoke in words like plain-talk of the city by the sea where the lights shone across all the land like stars caught in water. He spoke of the days when people walked its streets and lived inside its towers—before the war and the coming of the many deaths, before the great plagues swept the land with sickness, and the locusts consumed the very bread in hand.

The old one had laughed with joy and madness in his cave of stone. He wept with the bitterness of a stillborn's mother.

And Al-geran as a boy would listen and sip at the distant wisdom and pain. The old one taught him much about the world of the bygone days—though often the young Savage was asked to cross his heart to keep the secrets. Al-geran began to visit when he was a boy of six years and did for two summers more until the old one disappeared, and left an empty cave.

At 14 as was the custom; Al-geran took a wife. Their first child had 12 fingers—a lucky start, and after that came nine more children—with none less than ten fingers each—more good luck. The days of work grew longer, and he thought no more of the old one except for moments such as those when his rake would tear open the bosom of the earth, and the story of the past came spilling out.

His thoughts fluttered away like prairie chickens from the tragedy of myth and legend as memory of his first child brought back the vision of his wife on their first night.

Al-geran stood over the dark rows of earth and smiled.

Roshe was all of 13 summers when they married, and there were few women in the tribe that could boast such beauty. How soft her warm round belly had been, how sweet. Much different from the woman she was now.

Twenty years had passed, and ten children had slid between her legs. Her body once plump with youth was thinner now, and her breasts slack. The work of raising the children and keeping the home had thickened her muscle and hardened her hands.

Still, as Al-geran thought back on their first night, he felt warm welcome stirrings beneath his loincloth.

She may have aged, but Roshe was still a young woman beneath the blankets.

“Al-geran! What next then? Will you work or weave a cozy blanket of memories to curl under and drop your teeth upon,” she often chided him. “You should be planting wheat, not sowing thoughts of distraction.”

Al-geran leaned against his rake a moment more, wiping a thick forearm across his brow. His dark eyes studied the bright blue of the sky. “Why not distraction? What better way to pass the time as my body works.” A part of him wished to lie back on the dirt, like his children did when they finished their chores, to feel the warm hands of the sun upon his chest. But it seemed that his work was never done.

“*Work!*” he commanded himself. “Work, go home, and eat with your family.” He chuckled, raising his rake. “And see what Roshe thinks of these memories you have conjured.”

A gunshot, and he turned to face the trees at the edge of the field.

Then came the drumming of hooves and the screaming of children.

Another gunshot!

The Savage jerked awake with tears staining his face and shirt. He sat away from the others in a shadowed corner of the room.

Another *boom* echoed through the Blackhorse Saloon. *A drunkard firing his pistol at the ceiling.* The barkeep swung a shotgun and the heavy barrel laid the drunkard out.

Roshe.

Sickness filled Al-geran’s breast and clenched at his heart. *Roshe.* His spirit chased the dream, the memory. *The loss.* How beautiful she had been.

The Savage looked at the table before him, at the hands that framed the empty glass there. How pale and weak they looked. It was long since they had worked a field.

Long since they had caressed his Roshe.

8 – Blackhorse Saloon

At first look the owner of the Blackhorse Saloon had the appearance of any fine gentleman of breeding and wealth that you might find in Babylon City—embroidered waistcoat over an ample stomach, silk shirt, fine-tailored suit, hat and black calfskin boots. He moved and behaved like the very incarnation of the wealthy man of the towns. His skin was always pale and scrubbed, and his hair was well groomed, slicked over his head like black wax.

But that was only at a glance, and a glance is all the average man ever had the sand to give him. This “Gambler” as the locals called him, the owner of the Blackhorse, rarely

left his office and rooms atop the saloon, except for those moments in the wee hours of the morning when tobacco smoke had turned the air a hazy blue. Then, the Gambler would come out and play the late night players at whatever game of chance they chose, be it dice, cards or as you please.

At first the uninitiated might assume that the Gambler came out at such times to use his superior knowledge of the games in an effort to protect the financial liquidity of the Blackhorse Saloon, but his aggressive play and blatant disregard for his own money soon dispelled the notion. He would wager large sums for the most worthless of his opponent's resources. Instead of the diamond stickpins that protruded from their vests, the Gambler would wager for the hearts that beat beneath them. Or he would bet a small fortune in an effort to win another man's pledge of loyalty.

On the rare occasion that he lost, he paid no more attention to the parting money than he would to the rising sun. Though he rarely lost. There were whispered secrets about how he collected his winnings, but those who lost to him, if they ever turned up, never spoke of it again. Those transactions occurred behind the thick black curtains that closed on the Gambler's private room at the back of the saloon.

Upon second look, as such rare moments presented themselves; the Gambler's true pedigree became something of a greater mystery. Whenever he paused to look over his cards, or stood shaking the dice in his cold, white hands, something came over him. It was as though a north wind blew aside a thin covering of dust, and showed deep-etched lines beneath. He looked as old as the hills at such times but not in any frail or crippled way. Instead, the Gambler had a stony quality to him, hard as granite and just as ancient. And there was a peculiar set to his eyes—they would gleam with a scarlet light.

At those times when the Gambler opened the rigid slit beneath his pencil-thin moustache, his voice came out deep and sonorous, echoing like the words had been spoken long before and far away in a deep place dark and dripping.

The Gambler, on those rare occasions when he did join the gathering, appeared at night. During the day, another of the Blackhorse Saloon's owners kept his court.

Judge Ash could easily be mistaken for the Gambler; they shared a similar cast of features and movement. In fact, there was a rumor around the Territory that the two were brothers, though none of the gossips had any proof and none accused. But where the Gambler had little to do with the society from which he won his fortune, Judge Ash had very much indeed to do with the fortunes of others.

The morning would bring the Judge from the apartments above the Blackhorse, clucking busily to himself, as he clattered down the wooden steps in his black patent leather shoes. The Judge wore a dark gray suit with white pinstripes, and a hard round bowler hat that clung to his gray-haired scalp like a second skin.

He would step into the street at 7:30 each morning, pause a moment to gaze at his pocket watch, before shaking his head, and making his way along the main street. At the end he would pass the tall gates that opened into Fort Babylon where the enormous red brick courthouse sat in the auspicious company of Government Hall.

He would take his breakfast of toast, eggs and coffee in his comfortable offices behind his courtroom as he reviewed the legal cases that would be tried that day. The Judge worked in close proximity to the Governor's office, but he rarely saw the ruler of the Territory. Gubernatorial business kept his colleague otherwise occupied.

This morning as he opened his office, Judge Ash noticed something was awry. A darkness profound and strangely solid possessed his inner sanctum—pressed back against the light in the outer hall. He might have thought that someone, perhaps one of the cleaning staff, had forgotten to open the curtains and blinds; but the Judge knew that even had they been closed some small amount of daylight would have filtered in.

He steeled himself and walked into utter darkness.

Irritated, he reached out for a table just inside the door where he kept a tray of liquor, tobacco, matches and a lamp, but even as he moved through the gloom, he could feel the shadows resist his action.

Grasping in the dark, he noticed that the light from the hall did not enter the room. The inner murk lay across the floor like black paint.

And then a puff of air hit him—like a breeze through a broken window. *But where was the light?*

“Judge.” The voice came from the darkness overhead. It was dry, but as strong and unstoppable as a desert dune. There was a sound of movement—a flutter of feathers, and then a clatter where the Judge’s desk would be.

“Yes!” The Judge clutched at his spectacles, peering into the black. “*Ahem, yes?*”

“Judge.” Time wore at the voice, made it ancient. “I have read the signs correctly. *He comes.*”

“Yes?” The Judge froze in place, his face pressed against the muffling darkness. Annoyed, he shut the door to the hall behind him. “Yes. *He comes*, as it was long ago foretold.” The Judge knew the voice then, and the unthinkable struck him. “*You?* You were not to face him alone if he came!”

“I could not resist. The time is near.” An almost imperceptible quiver of lust entered the voice. “And when I found bait strong enough to draw him out...” There was a hard flap as something beat against the air. A gust of wind struck the Judge’s face.

“Despite our warning!” the Judge snarled, and then let the emotion pass. There was no point arguing with this one. “And the outcome?”

“I killed him with the old death,” the voice said. There was a touch of pride and then fear: “Or so I thought.”

“*We* would know if he were dead.” Anger melted the Judge’s face into a scowl. He waved at the darkness as though it was a cloud of steam. “What is—do we really need this *dim?*”

“I am injured, and require the protection of the dark,” the voice whispered from the shadow. Something wrong about the sound—it did not come from human lips. “I will need your assistance.”

“Injured?” The Judge thought that over. The owner of the voice was unbeatable, how could anyone? “*You?* Injured?” He quickly hid his anticipation. A time of reckoning would come and the Judge would not be displeased if such a time came without the owner of the voice. “Where did this happen?”

“Southeast of Pandora City. *He* is injured also, and may go to the people of the town for help,” the voice hissed from the darkness—a thread of ironic humor suddenly entered its tone. “We can catch him there.”

“Then *come*, if it is time.” The Judge placed his fists on his ample hips. “Why do you not ride to us?”

“He chased my mount, ere I killed him. I found other means to contact you, but the sun burns me to shadow. I am blind and lose all feeling,” came the voice, followed by a rattle like grass in the wind. “I need a body. You must help.”

“It is too early for us to ride in force, and our enemy will be watching now.” The Judge doubted this, but he had no special loyalty to the owner of the voice—and the rash fool had brought this predicament upon himself.

A lesson in humility?

And then the Judge’s stomach cramped with fear. None but the owner of the voice would dare face their enemy alone. They must be *Four* or risk all. “But there are some in your employ who may assist. I will attend to this.” The Judge turned, took a step out the door and shut it behind him.

General Carmine was away gathering his army, and unlikely to come. But *two* would suffice for what the Judge now planned. He made his way up the hallway toward the Governor’s office. If the leader of the Territory wasn’t there, he could be summoned back to the capitol quickly enough.

9 – A Gunfighter in Babylon City

Luke Raven was strangling on silent screams clutching frantically at his hips for guns that were not there. *Never!* Sweat poured over his brow, pasted his thin black hair to his scalp. *You can’t!* He drove toward consciousness, climbing up the bedpost to where his pistols hung in silver-trimmed holsters.

Stop, please, stop!

And then his fingers slipped around an ivory grip; one last panicked gulp of air shook him as he drew the gun and opened his eyes.

Better.

His heart began to slow. That’s better.

He could kill now.

The big pistol swung around the room looking for enemies.

He just needed the drop.

Light burned through a pair of lacy sheers, blinding him. Wincing at the glare, he glanced to the bedside table at an empty bottle, a cracked mug and a brown glass vial of laudanum.

The bedding was soaked.

It didn’t smell like piss.

A small favor.

Raven shivered, his slim under-muscled body drenched with sweat. He could not remember leaving the Blackhorse Saloon so cursed himself for recklessness. Then a dark feeling dropped through the pit of his stomach as he tried to retrace his walk back to his room.

No one killed *you*, so who did *you* kill?

He heard a buzz and looked over to see a fly caught in the space between the window and the sheers. It made a repetitive tapping noise as it struggled to get through the glass.

The gunfighter swung his legs off the bed, and pressed his palms against his eyes as a painful throb started up behind them. He was back in his room over the Spades and Aces

saloon. Its proprietor old William Dealer was pissed off that Raven did most of his drinking and gambling down the street at the Blackhorse, but like most men he would never express his displeasure to the gunfighter.

Another small favor.

Goddamn nightmares...

He got no peace from his dreams.

Raven rubbed his temples, dispelling the last of the images that haunted his waking mind. The nightmares were always so real and he had them whether he was into the whiskey and laudanum or not. That mix produced a sleeplike state of utter blackness, but the dreams waited at the gray periphery, ambushing him on his way in or out of the dark.

People and places changed in the nightmare, but it always came back to the same thing. He couldn't get his pistols up in time—he couldn't get the drop—so he died.

Always someone drew on him: a hot young *bangero* from the southern wolfpacks trying to earn his ink; a proud old cowboy who didn't like his look; or worse, another gunfighter calmly drawing his pistols and firing. Firing and claiming Raven's renown—and his life—everything he was.

For what it's worth.

In the nightmare they were always faster.

Never in life, but there...

And some quirk of the dream let Raven see the bullets coming. He knew you couldn't see a bullet; he'd fired his guns and been shot at enough to know. The plume of gun smoke gave you the line of fire, but that was all.

That was all.

Bullets turned invisible the moment you loaded your gun and stayed that way until you cut them out of the mangled flesh they'd killed or wounded. They were silent until you pulled the trigger. In a flash and blast they flipped through the air—like air—until they tore into bone and cartilage—smashed flesh and pulped organs.

And killed somebody.

An anxious memory of his ride to Babylon City crept out of the blackness in his mind.

Two nights ago he had raced north along the road from Gunpowder Station while lightning crackled like gunfire around him. Bolts of flame had blasted the air, sent his horse charging with madness through the dark—and there was no rain.

The storm had kept pace to torment him for a time before passing north. Once in Babylon City he drank in his room and then another dream—that one with flames.

He slept right through until supper last night, when hunger and a thirst for whiskey brought him to the Blackhorse.

Did you kill anyone?

He stood up, gritting his teeth against a blinding jab of pain that shot from temple to temple.

Keep moving.

Raven holstered his pistol, and then lurched over to his saddlebags where they hung on the back of a chair by the door. He flipped one open, and pulled a bottle of rawdog whiskey from it. Raven chewed the cork out and took three long drinks. *Rawdog* was a mix of white lightning and cheap rye distilled and favored by miners in the Western Mountains. The rotgut burned in his stomach, but it did the trick.

He grimaced, almost puked, but kept it down.

Amazing what you could get used to.

The gunfighter returned to the bed and braced himself as a cold sweat slid over him. He knew the nausea would pass but his head would ache all day.

Things had gone to hell.

His mind ran over the last few days. Too many people knew about Luke Raven now. Too many knew he'd been lucky too long. Too many thought he might be losing his edge. That's what got the nightmare going.

He was on the run.

This time it was a pair of brothers from Plentyboats wanting him dead. Raven had shot their youngest sibling over a card table for palming an ace. *It looked like an ace.* Hard to tell in the lamplight, anyone could make the mistake. *What kind of fool palms a three of diamonds?*

The gunfighter had called him on it, but then the young pup got prideful and went for his pistol. After that, the killing was a fairplay shot as the other gamblers agreed. Sheriffs, marshals and judges commonly accepted self-defense, rustling and cheating at cards or marriage inside the rules for the use of deadly force.

Fairplay.

But the brothers didn't see it that way. They had decided Raven was a big shot gunfighter murdering a poor defenseless boy.

And Raven had won enough money in Plentyboats over the years to build a sizeable lynch mob if the brothers were left to talk, so he ran before anyone could work up the nerve to come calling.

He gave the brothers the slip on the road to Ironmine, then circled back northeast, going cross-country to miss Fort Hill and Gunpowder Station before ending up at the Spades and Aces saloon in Babylon City. Raven had no regrets about killing the young man. A gunfighter couldn't sit there and be cheated without inviting a bullet in the back everywhere he went.

But he'd left in a hurry and had only his horse and tack, guns and a few gold coins to his name.

He couldn't fall much lower.

The Blackhorse Saloon was the biggest such establishment in the capitol and was well known for its high stakes games and marathon poker sessions. He knew the stories about its proprietor—the *Gambler* as people called him. Rumor had it the man was wild for a fool's bet and would part with a king's ransom for the chance to own a man's soul or service. Raven didn't quite understand the process, but he needed a stake and was willing to lay *his* soul on the table.

Take it; before it's shot full of holes.

But the Gambler had been absent from the gaming tables, cheating Raven out of a chance to improve his lot. He had wanted, *needed* to challenge the Gambler—without a big win, the gunfighter knew he would just wake up the poorer.

That turn of luck had started the black mood that dragged him into a thirst for more whiskey.

Three of the saloon's hired guns had recognized him when he first arrived—even bought him drinks. As Raven got drunker, he had watched with mixed emotions as men came to the saloon just for a look at him. *They did that. He could still draw a crowd.*

Dangerous but sweet in its way... The Gambler had to have known Luke Raven was looking for a game, but dared to ignore him. It was a slap in the face that had made Raven recklessly consider charging up to the Gambler's apartment guns blazing.

But the whiskey held the high card.

Maybe his luck hadn't deserted him after all, and though he awoke hung over and measurably poorer—he did wake up. He took another drink, and swirled the rawdog around in his mouth to scrape the filmy coating out.

The law had no hand on him locally—there were no warrants in Babylon City that he could remember. No legal hooks anywhere in the Territory. In fact there was a time over in Ironmine City when he'd been deputized for a brief period until his infamy drew more crime to town than it chased away. Regardless of the fact that he called himself the acquaintance of many a sheriff—all retired gunfighters anyway—he lived his life like a wanted man.

Just lay low a spell...

The Territory was big, but didn't boast enough cities for a fellow to lose himself in, and so any peace he found was soon interrupted by gunfire, but it was all personal.

What. To. Do?

Raven spotted his trousers where he had dropped them by the door. They formed a rumpled pile beside his embroidered waistcoat and jacket. He remembered when the outfit was a fine-tailored suit and not the worn and threadbare trail duds that hard living had turned them into.

He used to enjoy his little piece of celebrity, before realizing it drew a lot of bullets too. Stories grew up around him, and chased him from any place he tried to rest. He had learned to sleep in the saddle, and go weeks without a bath or change of clothes. He even used a few Savage survival tricks he'd picked up along the way, but there had been a time when he liked the extra attention.

When he could look at his public without a belly full of whiskey.

When the roar of his guns was like real power, and not just the sound of his fear.

The gunfighter rubbed the short hair on his head, felt no dizziness, then stood and walked to a washbasin and mirror by the window. He splashed water on his face, over his head, and then froze.

There—just then, he saw it! His eyes were the same dark brown, but for a second they looked like they had in his nightmares. A ring of white blazed around the center and the pupil was a black slit running top to bottom like a rattlesnake's.

The *vision* was gone before he blinked.

Raven rubbed his bristled cheeks, moved close to the mirror snarling.

The kids at the foster home had teased him about his looks.

He was told his mother had given him the yellow skin and slanted eyes. His father was responsible for the full lips and tight-cropped kinky hair.

The hell with them both.

Then, a rustling sound turned him.

A light brown envelope had been pushed under his door.

He reached out to his holsters on the bedpost, pulled a gun and moved slowly forward.

He grabbed the knob and swung the door open.

Outside the hall was dim, lit by a window near the stairs at the end. Thin cracks of light filtered under the other doors in the hall. Someone was playing the piano downstairs.

Where?

Raven bent, snatched up the envelope and slid a nail under the flap. He pulled out a fold of paper with writing in a fine script on it:

“Luke Raven. Please meet with Territorial Judge Ash at one o’clock this afternoon regarding a lucrative position of employment. Babylon City Courthouse.”

Luke knew his letters well enough to understand “lucrative position” equated to money for work, though like most people he harbored a suspicion for anyone that used language much outside the normal “how do you do’s.” Luke had a little schooling in his early years, and his life as a gunfighter had demanded a ready knowledge of language. Information kept him ahead of the competition.

A fly buzzed near. He shooed it off with the envelope.

The Judge...

Raven discarded a moment’s paranoia as he imagined the Judge setting a trap for him. The gunfighter was certain that his recent kills were fairplay, and any that could raise a question were tidily hidden away in the past.

With a couple of companies of Red Riders at his beck and call, the Judge could have ordered his arrest and it would be done. If the Judge wanted him dead, he’d be dead whether he ran from Babylon City or walked through the front door of the courthouse.

Raven couldn’t run from that kind of power.

And where would he go?

After a shave Raven went to his saddlebags and dug out another shirt. The cuffs were frayed and one elbow gone from washing on river rocks but it was his cleanest. As he slipped his waistcoat and jacket over it—both sour with the reek of the Blackhorse Saloon—he checked his pockets for money.

A big black fly spiraled out of his jacket, buzzing at his face. He winced and swept a hand at it, but missed. The fly continued on a loud spiral until it started thumping up against the ceiling.

Raven pulled on his boots and paused by the mirror, slapping away another fly that settled on his shoulder.

Goddamn flies.

He took a drink of rawdog before placing the black point of his hat on his head. Raven checked his pockets for his empty billfold and left the room.

10 – Fort Babylon

Raven snarled under the hot lash of the sun. His guts churned and chills ran over him. He gulped fresh air but it didn’t help. He was sick, terrified and hungover.

The gunfighter struggled to control his breathing.

His heart started to race again.

It was like that the whole time riding up Babylon City’s main street.

He wanted to run.

It was his safest bet.

His horse came to a halt by the parade grounds in front of Fort Babylon. Raven hadn't reined it in, but he hadn't spurred it on either.

A fly settled on his hand. He grabbed for it, but missed.

Goddamn flies...

Raven had to ride into a prison.

Where are your theories now?

A stout wall of timber and stone 25 feet high protected the massive Territorial Government buildings. Watchtowers held armed guards every 50 feet.

There's still time.

His heart raced. He pulled his hat brim low.

The pale dirt and stone underfoot bounced a blinding dazzle of sunlight into the gunfighter's eyes. A warm wash of perspiration soaked his back and his stomach cramped with nausea.

Just do it.

Raven wanted to clear his throat, but knew it would make him gag—even vomit. Swallowing was worse.

He bit his lower lip and focused on the pain in his head.

What are you doing here?

He kicked his mount into action, and the horse jogged across the gravel. It was too late for doubt; the cards were dealt.

A group of Red Riders at the big main gate stepped forward.

His killer's eyes ran over their red tunics. Six men: each wore a holstered handgun, and a sheathed double-bladed longcat hanging opposite. They all had rifles slung over their shoulders.

He regarded the longcats with some disdain. They made sense, he supposed for a cavalry soldier, but he considered them a silly affectation otherwise, especially when worn at the hip by some gunfighters and dandy gamblers. He only worried when they were in the possession of former Red Riders.

Can't draw them quick. And Raven knew in his circles that you'd be dead before you got close enough to use the unwieldy weapons.

They were used among wealthy folks of the gentlemen class for non-lethal duels—more a test of skill than courage.

But bullets were better for killers.

He appraised the riders in front of him. All young, which was good. Fast, but easy to panic. Being young and excitable didn't win many gunfights.

Raven knew there was a time he could take all six, but the tremor in his hands where they crossed over the saddle horn suggested that might no longer be the case.

Don't think like that.

He took a deep breath.

You just need the drop.

The gunfighter rode up to the guards and without dismounting handed them Judge Ash's note. One of the men took the letter and disappeared through the gates.

Raven watched the remaining guards.

They were silent. Four were bored or hung over, but the fifth, he kept his sharp eyes on Raven. *He* was the problem. Two of the others actually had their pistols strapped into

their flap holsters; but this man, he barely blinked. He kept his hands loose at his sides and stared. His gun was plain to see. There were no flaps or ties.

That rattled Raven.

You calling me out?

He glared back.

His stomach twisted.

Don't think like that.

The sixth guard returned, and spoke to the others. The gate was pulled aside and Raven was waved through into a dark tunnel. After 25 echoing feet, the second gate was open.

The grounds around the government buildings were covered in crushed white gravel—dazzling in the afternoon sun. And the new light blinded the gunfighter.

Careful. Breathe.

The Government Hall and Courthouse stood five stories, the brick and stone buildings were the largest in the Territory. Both structures were of similar design; but Raven recognized the judicial seat by the large copper dome over its main entrance. The buildings were side-by-side, just off center of the dry, brown lawn that grew in a tight patch around them.

Fifty feet from the courthouse steps were three wooden gallows built 15 feet apart. Locals called the area Old Golgotha and each scaffold had a name.

There was Sodom and Gomorrah to either side—built to punish earthly sinners, while the center, larger, frame bore the name “Justice” reserved as it was for individuals bound for God’s court of law. Rare it was to see a man kick from its long rope. People said “Justice” was reserved for those guilty of crimes beyond the measure of mere men.

Everybody else just rode Sodom or Gomorrah to Hell.

By some quirk of the Judge’s character, he’d even arranged to have “Justice’s” name carved high up on its solid crossbeam.

When Raven was halfway across the blinding gravel, a pair of Red Riders stepped from the shadows of some wilted trees that grew by the courthouse entrance. They led Raven’s horse to a hitching post and water trough in the shade of the buildings.

Raven dismounted, glared at his escort and made his way into the courthouse. The new guards made no mention of removing his guns, which was something he had feared; but it was the right of every person in the Territory to carry one, and no sane Governor could go against that without risking civil war. But precautions would be taken just the same.

The riders accompanying him were men of middle years—probably Savage-fighters from the Last Expansion—their features wrinkled and scarred by experience and sun. They were in no hurry, and returned his glare with frank aggression.

I don't like you either. Raven raised his upper lip. *You calling me out?*

He was led to a large reception area with paintings of former governors on the walls and across that to a waiting room in front of a series of doors. Raven’s quick vision scanned the walls and offices. He realized that any number of guards could be hidden about the place.

Sweat soaked down his back.

All fairplay in the courthouse.

Raven knew the first people of the towns brought fairplay out of the dark into these halls, and built the laws of the land on it. The Governor was no fool and neither was the Judge.

They'd play fair.

His escort finally showed him into a large office.

Raven's eyes shifted left and right as he entered—nothing—again—*nothing*. He studied the room between glances. The only light came through half opened drapes covering a tall window on the far wall. He could see the slim figure of Justice in the gap.

The ceiling and walls were painted gray, then trimmed with light pine planks and wainscoting that traveled the full perimeter of the room. There were paintings: one was a woman pouring water, and over the fireplace a man danced with a jug of wine.

Directly across from the door was a large gray desk. Raven realized with some dismay that the Judge sat in a heavy oak chair behind it.

He must have missed him in the dim light.

He had you cold.

The Judge cradled a thick leather case full of paper. His look was mildly displeased as he peered over his spectacles. He pinched something between long fingers that hung from a silver chain around his neck.

He was the chief judge and almost as old as the Territory, why he...

"Mr. Raven?" A voice deep and melodious, sparkling with cool, clear charm sprang from his left.

Whipping around, Raven froze at the sight of its owner, his fingertips brushing his pistol grips.

Governor White was a man well over six feet in height, and a good yard and a half in width. He gave the appearance of being fat, until careful study showed his enormous body to be as solid as a sack full of rocks. His neck was as big around as Raven's waist and carried the large square head atop of it like a marble pillar. The Governor's eyes were clear and ringed around by silvery irises. The big man's hair was thick and white, and curled at his ears like cloud. He flashed enormous teeth in a smile, and the wrinkles around his full-lipped mouth made the expression look permanent. He wore a gigantic white suit, right down to a pair of ivory calfskin boots.

And you didn't see him coming.

"Mr. Raven?" A big, large-fingered hand reached toward him. "I'm Governor White."

The gunfighter's shock was rattling through his mind as he numbly took the offered hand. *How the hell?* He pulled his hat off, perplexed.

Breathe. He snapped his teeth at the air, felt his heart hammer. *Breathe.*

Big as a goddamn storm cloud and White had the drop—fair as fair.

Understanding suddenly registered in Governor White's big face. "Are you all right, Mr. Raven?"

"Yes." The gunfighter set his hat back on his head. His fingers twitched reflexively in the air. Raven knew he could have been a dead man just then. "You have a light step..."

"A light step?" Mirth flickered in the big man's features. "Well I'll take that as a compliment. My Joanne says I've been grazing too much along the trail these days. Sorry if I startled you!" He gestured with a thick arm to where the Judge sat at the desk.

"You didn't startle," Raven hissed, uselessly—*you had me cold.*

“You know Judge Ash?” the Governor asked matter-of-factly. “Please, take a seat.” He gestured to a wingbacked chair opposite the desk. The big man moved around, sat on a broad couch against the wall.

Raven lowered himself into his chair—he glanced from the Governor, to the Judge and back. Then something caught his eye. The Governor held a big, black tail feather in his hand.

From an eagle...or buzzard, but...

“Mr. Raven, if we could dispense with formalities.” The Judge’s nasal voice was as pinched as his features. “I have a full afternoon with *Old Golgotha*.” He glanced at the gunfighter then away.

Raven’s eyes caught the pendant twitching between the Judge’s fingers. It was a balance about the size of child’s hand. A miniature version of the type they used at the grocers for weighing grain. The small man smiled and placed some papers out on the desk. Sharp yellow teeth were exposed in a crooked ‘V.’

The Governor turned his unsettling gaze upon Raven.

“You have some experience with law enforcement, Mr. Raven?” the Judge asked.

“My record’s clear,” Raven rasped. “It’s all fairplay. There’s notes to that effect about—if you look.”

“You misunderstand,” the Governor said, breaking in with a quiet laugh. “You have worn a badge on a occasion?”

Take a breath. Raven’s bowels churned.

“Yes,” the gunfighter said. “In Ironmine for a time. And twice deputized and took up with a posse over to Treeharveston looking for a gang of rapists.”

“Well, we would like you to perform a small function for us that I’m sure you’ll agree falls within the measure of that type of work,” the Governor explained. “There is a man in Pandora City who is an enemy of every decent person of the towns. An outlaw and renegade who is considered dangerous.”

“And we felt your reputation as a gunfighter might work well for us,” the Judge said. “You *are* fast?”

Raven nodded. The Judge and Governor shared a look.

“You want me to shoot him down?” Raven snarled. “Pandora’s a ways off.” He did the math in his head. It was a hard six days in the saddle. “Ain’t there none at Fort Phoenix can do this? It’s closer.”

“True, Pandora is far off, but the man in question is of a dubious political character, and we require privacy regarding his handling,” said the Judge, fingering his miniature balance. “We’d like you to travel to Pandora without fanfare and take charge of him with the help of the local sheriff. Red Riders will relieve you soon after.”

“You see General Carmine’s scouts have reported Savages massing in the East Peaks, and there have been raids and bloody-handed deeds. They’re getting bolder by the day,” the Governor said, using the big feather as a fan. “The Red Riders are required at points south and east, and a company cannot be spared for a time.”

“We’ll pay you very well,” the Judge said and before Raven could say more the old man had produced a sheet of paper, pointing at underlined bits with his pen.

“Of course it is a standard contract, Mr. Raven, something you should be familiar with.” He paused, his eyes searching Raven’s face before he resumed. “You can see that

half will be paid up front.” Pushing the inkbottle forward, he showed his yellow teeth again. “The balance upon completion of the contract.”

Raven leaned forward in his chair and took the pen.

He paused.

“What if he leaves before I get there?” Raven asked.

“He is wounded, and should be incapacitated,” the Governor assured him.

“Who is this *renegade* we’re talking about?” he growled. “And why send *me*?”

“We want him alive, but dead will do,” the Judge said before sharing another look with the Governor. “He is fast with his guns, but they say you’re faster.” The Judge stared into Raven’s eyes again. “Rumor suggests that you know him, and if true, may work in our favor.”

Walking from the Courthouse, Raven pressed a trigger finger to the badge that was pinned over his heart. He was a Special Territorial Marshal now. The swearing in had taken no time at all. There was an awkward moment when the Judge stared into his eyes over the well-worn Bible—a weird familiarity flickering behind his features.

Raven was given a couple of bank notes for purchasing supplies and a packhorse. They paid him half his fee with another note for \$500. On his way out the Judge handed him an envelope and told him to pick up a tamed Savage from the Babylon City Jail. The man was a tracker and could help him stay off the main roads. The Judge said the fellow was of poor character but talented, with debts to General Carmine that he was eager to clear.

Do not draw attention.

The envelope held the Savage’s terms of release.

Six days’ ride to Pandora City.

We want him alive, but dead will do. He was a marshal not an assassin.

Raven paused and gazed at the sky to guess the time. He swatted absently at a fly buzzing around his head.

Watch your back.

Raven had to understand the game before he’d know the value of the cards he’d been dealt.

11 – The Tracker

Unhappy or not, depressed or otherwise possessed by a mood colored black, Al-geran crawled out of sleep into the worst hangover of his life.

The first breath of air he gulped was poisonous and came pouring back out of him green and yellow—rank and bitter. On his knees he watched the stain spread outward, seeping into the weathered cracks in his hands where they struggled against the weight of the stone floor. The second breath was poison too, and after it had turned to spasms and sprayed out of his mouth in a thin green jet, he promised himself he would wait before trying another taste.

Suddenly, his arms trembled and he collapsed against the world, almost missing the puddle of bad air.

Al-geran lay on his back with every fissure in his skull burning inward, etching their shapes upon his brain. He gulped a breath, waited and felt some relief. His position on the floor helped him keep the mouthful down. The cool weight of the stone on the back of his head soothed him—slowed the nauseated twitching of his innards.

To his right the bars stretched up toward the ceiling spaced apart the width of a man's hand. The fuzzy light that burned in between them caused his temples to *thump*. Even closing his eyes did not dull the fire that scorched his brain.

Al-geran moaned like a dying buffalo.

He was in jail.

He remembered drinking the rawdog whiskey reserved for him at the Blackhorse Saloon. Bitter. Metallic. Sour. He struggled to remember more. There was a table at the back where a door opened on the outhouses. They'd let him drink there. So he did that. He drank and wept and slipped in and out of life.

The elders warned that when a man drank too much whiskey; he died for a time to visit with those people he had lost and to chase the herds that rumbled across eternal plains. And while a man's spirit was away in death his body could be used by demons.

A shiver of fear ran through his chest. Al-geran could not resist the call of heaven when the whiskey flowed. The demons wanted to use his body, so they whispered about the spirit fields to encourage his thirst. And he knew there was great danger in doing the drink like the men of the towns, because if a demon took his body to do its dark business, the men of the towns could misunderstand, and hang him out of fear.

He did not care about hanging, but he did not wish to do the evil that would bring the rope. His weaknesses had already brought enough pain to the innocent.

He was not a Red Rider.

Lying on the cold stone floor, he twisted his shaking hands into spirit shapes in the air over him: the antelope, the bull, and the fox—good luck charms of his people. Then the Savage folded his fingers into wings and fluttered the bird of hope over his face, praying that his body had not been possessed, and that it had not done evil to the innocent.

He did not bother praying to the gods.

There was a sudden deafening clang of steel keys on iron bars. Al-geran pressed his palms against his ears and groaned again. Distantly he heard the grumbling of other men, echoing through the cool air.

Other drinkers coming back from death.

Men of the towns crowded in other cells away from the Savage.

“Come on, Al...” It was Deputy Locking. “You got to get yourself cleaned up. There's company.”

Al-geran knew Deputy Locking's face. He knew that the man's weak chin would be dipped onto his thin chest, and his full purple lips would form an ugly black hole beneath a cleft palate. The Savage knew that the deputy's eyes would be wet and watery like a rabbit's—fearful of the Savage in the cage. *Like the all rest, Locking would...*

But Al-geran stopped himself. There was no need for evil thoughts of the deputy. Locking was a fair man, as the people of the towns went, and he had not abused his position over Al-geran the many times the Savage had found himself coming back to life in the Babylon City jail.

Al-geran had the scars to prove that others had.

“Let’s go, Al.” The deputy’s words were plain despite his facial deformity. Painful light filtered past the deputy and through the open door, illuminated the vomit on the floor.

“Oh, Lord,” Locking gasped, exasperated. “Goddamn it, Al. What a mess. You’ve got the makings of a Savage in you!” He shook his head. “And you being such a damned good Blackjack player—I reckoned you for *civilized*. Get up, so I can mop this.”

Al-geran felt the deputy’s thin hand slip under his arm, strain to pull him to his feet. It was true; Al-geran played good Blackjack. On many occasions had he tried his luck on the deputy. He liked the game and would have played it at the Blackhorse too, except the other men of the towns did not like to gamble with Savages, and hated losing to them.

Stumbling to his feet, Al-geran snarled at himself. There *was* a time that they had hated losing to him.

In the first days when he had come to the town, he still looked like a Savage. He dressed with a finger-bone necklace, bear claws through his earlobes, the paint of war on his face, and eagle feathers in his long black hair. His loss of Roshe and the rest of his family had been a mask of death and a fire burned in his eyes that cowed the people who saw it.

In those days, he had been allowed to drink at the Blackhorse because the people of the towns were uncertain about turning him away. The General spared him from death and that mercy had followed the Savage like a protective spell. So they fed him whiskey to soften his spirit and got him to tell the tale of Roshe and his failure.

But he kept drinking.

And now... Al-geran scowled. Now they laughed at him because he wore clothing like the men of the towns—a gift of Deputy Locking, pulled from the corpse of a man who died in his cell. Now they would deal him cards and laugh when they took them away. They laughed at him and kicked him like a dog.

And he did not care. His soul laughed along with them. The men of the town had a right to abuse his disgrace—he was nothing. He had lost his family, and yet he lived. He had lacked the courage to die with them and their murders were not avenged.

He had declared war on the people of the towns despite his dead tribe’s law—and he had lost the war before the first blow.

A coward! A failure.

“By God, Al...” Locking looked Al-geran up and down. “I can just see the wheels a-working. I’d suggest you go and get yourself a drink, but there’s a fellow here to see you. And, there’s been a judgment in your case.”

“*Judgment?*” Al-geran spoke the plain-talk. “In the case of what?”

The deputy smiled. “My word.” His good humor faded when his eyes fell on the vomit staining the Savage’s chest. “Al...” He shook his head. “You clean yourself up over at the trough there.” He pointed to a big stone cistern outside the row of cells. Beside it sat a pail and a cake of soap. “I’ve got some water for you. I’m sorry it ain’t hot, but I’m not your maid neither. I’ll tell you what’s what while you clean up.”

Al-geran staggered past the deputy, his brain throbbing.

Locking shook his head and followed him out of the cell and over to the wall where a mop, pail and broom was kept. “The Judge freed you.” Locking poured half of Al-geran’s wash water into his own bucket, then moved over to the cell and began to mop the floor as he talked.

“A man brung your papers, but there’s strings attached, so it’s a mixed blessing,” he lisped before continuing: “Last night I found you in an alley just three doors down from the Blackhorse. You were stinking drunk, and just struggling between sleep and God only knows what—you’d be fine if you’d just stay down. You know, Al? That’s the shame of it. Just as I was asking you what you planned to do for the rest of the evening—real jokey-like—you took a swing at me. That’s fine. No problem at all. Since I didn’t feel there was any need to report that part of it and it wasn’t the first time and you’re a poor aim and what the hell I know it didn’t come from your heart. But I figured you’d be getting into more trouble if I left you out there, so I charged you with vagrancy.” Locking dipped the mop into his bucket, and then dropped it on the floor with a loud *smack*.

Al-geran steadied himself by clutching the sides of the cistern. He had managed to lift his bucket of wash water and place it on the stone surface. Then he was overcome with shaking and nausea. As the deputy talked, the Savage struggled to keep his balance.

“I’m almost sorry I did that.” The deputy’s voice held a touch of remorse. The cleft in his lips smacked wetly. “But I guess I was kind of sore at you for coming up in my face, and all. Just the same, if I hadn’t picked you up you might have run into some fellow who wasn’t as charitable as myself. Anyway, I guess this man is here to *get* you. His papers explain the strings attached. Something about you owing *the General*.”

The General.

Al-geran dumped his fists into the wash water.

...owing the General.

Like an ancient, Al-geran started rubbing the cool liquid against his forehead with feeble fingers. He sensed the deputy’s presence by his right elbow.

“Funny thing. I hadn’t turned in the papers charging you yet; but I stepped out for an hour or so for breakfast this morning—that’s all I can think. Papers must have been picked up then. I’d only jotted a note to scare you. That Judge—he’s hard to stay a step ahead of.” Locking shrugged.

“So, the conditions, well I’ll read them to you if need be, but here’s the gist.” When the deputy smiled his lips pulled away to reveal the dull pink band of his tongue pressing down on his lower teeth. “You’re to track for the man who’s here to get you. He’s got a territorial marshal star, and he’s going to Pandora City. You’ve got to take him there.”

“The road is plain.” Al-geran felt a sluggish surge of adrenaline. “He don’t need no tracker.” His mind was filling with black thoughts about the General.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll explain himself.” Deputy Locking thumped a hand against Al-geran’s naked back. The Savage had removed his shirt to wash it. “Least ways, you’ve got to go whether you want to or not. The Judge is pretty straightforward in the terms of release.”

Al-geran’s hands trembled against the cistern as a wave of nausea passed. He remembered other times he’d been ordered to track, like he was being tempted to leave, to forget his place. What he owed... What he was.

“I’ll get your things.” The deputy’s voice was conciliatory. “A year or two back, I confiscated your carbine and a spear for safe keeping.” A tender look crossed Locking’s face. “This ain’t bad for you neither, you being a Savage and all in amongst the towns. It ain’t right” Again the hand on his shoulder, Al-geran’s muscles stiffened against the familiarity. “Babylon ain’t doing you no good.”

“If they want a coward to track for them, I will track.” Al-geran stared into the deputy’s weak green eyes.

“Well, who needs enemies, Al?” Deputy Locking shook his head, looked at him thoughtfully. “Come on then...” He turned and led Al-geran through the door that opened into the large main office.

The Savage struggled into his wet shirt behind him. He pushed through a waist high door that separated the outer office from the dirty business of jailing in the back.

The territorial marshal was sitting in a chair behind the sheriff’s desk.

The sheriff was nowhere to be seen, likely down at the Blackhorse scaring up another game. He didn’t have much more to do by way of keeping the peace. It was a Red Rider town.

Al-geran’s heart sank.

The territorial marshal was Luke Raven.

He knew him from the Blackhorse and from stories.

He was a bad man.

The trip to Pandora City would not be easy.

Then Al-geran scowled.

Raven mistook it as a greeting and grimaced awkwardly.

The Savage hoped the trip was hard. Maybe he could get killed and he would not have to be a coward anymore.

12 – The Shaman

The old shaman watched the ghosts. He saw them in the fire as the dark night pressed down on him. Pictures flickered in the flames and shapes glowed under the coals. He pulled his robe tight against the chill as the ancient towers of the world gone by grew up out of the yellow heat. He watched as the life-haters peered from shimmering windows. They laughed as the sky filled with smoke, as the cities spread like rot, darkening the world’s face from shore to plain to mountaintop.

The destroyers danced and coupled, and choked the lands with hungry faces. And they burned the earth’s black blood and ate the herds and fouled the oceans. And poisons came from them that killed the air and soil, and made the yellow sun burn and burn and burn.

And they thought their god would save them, so they poisoned and murdered and cared not at all.

Feeling both pity and glee, the old shaman watched their cities vanish in pillars of fire. He smiled and wept as their bones melted in white flame.

He no longer laughed when they died, for he’d seen the first spirits of *his* own future. And the recklessness would return, and the survivors would kill the land again and bring the end.

Unless he could stop the people of the towns.

Fingerbones sang a few words and threw an offering into the fire. It was an old thing of shiny stone and metal rings. He nodded approvingly as the coals melted the shiny stone, as the Wild Path was cleaned of its shape. The offering came from the world that

was before, a thing coveted by the people of the towns. The strange symbols etched in its surface meant something to them.

It meant nothing to Fingerbones at all.

The people of the towns prayed to their dead god for they craved the soft habits of his dying world. And their voices were heard beyond the edge of life.

And the dead god stirred.

The old shaman wished he was not alive at this time and yet, he had seen the events that surrounded his span as easily as he looked at the stones around his fire. When he was a boy, before he learned the art of *fingerbones* and earned the name, his mother had concerned herself not overmuch with the nightmares of her young son.

What mother does? Children learned from the fear in their dreams.

Such dreams.

Fingerbones sat by the fire looking ancient despite his mere 50 years. Life was hard in the East Peaks, and wore a man, creased and scarred him beyond his time. There was a day that people could see 70 summers, so the stories said, so the legends go.

Fingerbones wouldn't.

He was full of fury and fear for death stalked the camps of the Irawk, his people, and the other tribes, like the wolves stalked the herds on the Greenbelt.

Some said the tribes were weak from the time before. Their blood was watered from the days of childhood and rain. The time after the death of the god had been terrible with the new men and women shivering in the forests, enslaved by ignorance, and belief in the past.

Among the tribes, the old stories were passed along from one to the next, telling the tale of the rebirth, when the children grew up and made children. He remembered a missionary speaking like a friend, fearlessly in the minutes before Fingerbones cut his belly and ate his liver. The old shaman made a shape with his hands to ward against the holy man's spirit.

The missionary said in plain-talk: "And the wanderers broke into two groups. Gregory led the people of the towns out of darkness, and built the first house on the plains. Them things we got we owe him. It was his remembering the ways of the Lord and righteousness that brought us to the light. It was he that showed us the wickedness of the ways of the earth that died and the promise buried in its bones.

"The other group of people followed Solomon onto the Wild Path. There they lived among the beasts and rolled against the bosom of the earth, in itself no sin, other than their ways embraced the green and wet of nature and forsook the tidy word of God. Without defense against the darkness, in time they were corrupted, and in Savage tribes bore blood and flames across the plains—jealous of their betters in the towns."

The old shaman smiled, remembering the missionary's screams.

Fingerbones knew of Old Solomon, he of the early days and trek onto the Wild Path. When the old tribes were formed. And he knew the stories of Gregory, the man who started the towns, and brought war to the Savages.

The Irawk people learned their names from Solomon. He told them of the ancient tribes, the first people. And the Irawk grew from pure blood and were told to mix their seed with the white and the black, the brown and the yellow foundlings who wandered with them—who also chose the Wild Path.

From these unions came warriors with buffalo brown skins and eyes like almonds. Others with yellow flesh and hair like fire. And then the people on the Wild Path broke into tribes, some to hunt, some to fish and others to farm.

The great fire from the dying god had eaten up the old works, scattered the herds and burned the forests. But places were found to hunt and farm and live in a land protected by a ring of high mountains sweeping many miles to the Greenbelt and the sea.

Among the tribes it was decided to hunt in the Greenbelt but only warriors would live there to protect its life. There were other places in the mountains where the tribes tended their children and lived their customs. They left the life in the Greenbelt to follow its own Wild Path and the tribes only suckled there when the seasons allowed and when there was need.

Fingerbones had heard the stories of the days when the survivors fought over scraps of food like crows. Others ate the flesh of the dead. Old Solomon taught them about the folly of speed and cities, and so the elders found the Wild Path.

And Solomon knew the Greenbelt had to follow its own path so the life there could swell and grow. The tribes could feed upon the herds but never break ground there.

Not so, the people of the towns. They clung to their dead god and from him learned ways of killing more than they needed and catching what they wanted for their own. Heedless of the tribes they took life from the Greenbelt to feed their farms and towns.

They took and put nothing back. They ate and did not share.

They would have lived in the Greenbelt, if not for its guardians and the long walk across the Savagelands.

But they had tried. With the Red General, they came in scarlet coats and battled.

And many died.

The tribes were scattered.

The people of the towns ran back to their homes.

And time passed.

The tribes recovered and the people of the towns built things.

As a boy, Fingerbones had seen the return of the Red Riders, of their flaming rifles and silver claws. Fingerbones' screams had awakened his whole tribe as the hooves of the horsemen thundered through his dreams.

His father had wanted him to be a warrior and ride the lands hunting beasts and killing the people of the towns. And so Fingerbones had learned much of the art of arrow, spear and club before his seventh year.

But the shaman of his tribe, a white-haired ancient with coal-black eyes, came to his parents one day.

"He must come with me," the shaman had said, pointing at young Fingerbones. "He must learn the ways of the *fingerbones*. The spirits gave me his name."

Fingerbones remembered his mother's pride, that her son would have such a position in the tribe but as his father's only surviving son there was sadness. They knew the rites of the shaman. His father knew the boy would be castrated, and freed of his seed. But the shaman had the power to take him, and so the father parted with him willingly. If his fortunes held, he might make other sons.

Great emotion crawled through Fingerbones' chest like a worm. His father died before he could make another son. And his mother was slain by Red Riders.

The wheel turned and seasons passed, and even as the last war faded, nightmares plagued him. He saw a time coming when the war would start again, but this time his tribe would not survive.

And then he had another dream.

Many years before, while Fingerbones sang over a different fire, a spirit flew up out of the flames. It was black and bore the shape of a man, and its eyes were red.

It smelled of blood and decay, and he thought it was the vulture spirit that ate the souls of the dead. Had it come for him?

“It does not matter what you sing,” the spirit had said. The flames flickered over its true shape—a face like a skull and hands of bone. “The people of the towns will kill the Irawk, and the Savage brothers Cheyokee, Apa and the rest. They fear you, and when they build their towns, they will hunt you and kill you all.”

Fingerbones had sat there stricken silent as the grave.

“You can stop it.” Spectral fangs had flashed. “If you believe my words.”

“I have seen the end,” Fingerbones had said, “and I believe your words.”

“Then listen for me in the fire, and my whispers as you sleep,” the dark spirit said. “For I will tell you the paths to take.”

And over the years that followed, Fingerbones listened to the dark spirit and the path was always true. From its words, the Irawk found the cowboys and their stolen herds, and they killed them, as they also killed Red Riders as they slept, and settlers breaking soil.

Always the path was true to blood and conquest over the people of the towns.

The dark spirit whispered of a time to come when he would aid the tribes in a final battle, but that time would require the gathering of tribes.

“Put aside your squabbles, and talk to the Irawk clans, and forget the thrill of vengeance to take my words to the Apa and Cheyokee tribes,” the dark spirit had said. “Make them understand, and you will see that I have already whispered the truth to them. Watch the moon, and listen for thunder. Make a force of all who follow the Wild Path. If you answer my call we will chase the people of the towns from the Territory.”

Fingerbones had labored among his clans, and among the tribes. Close he came to death and torture, but the dark spirit had been whispering. Fellow shaman and aged warriors spoke of a final battle they saw in their dreams—and a Savage victory.

From Fingerbones’ efforts came the Wild Army. Thousands of warriors from all the clans and tribes eagerly prepared—awaiting the dark spirit’s call. For a year now, they ranged the East Peaks in small bands, vigilant, staying as close as they dared to the plains.

But they made ready for war.

Fingerbones was sure the time approached. On the last full moon the dark spirit called for a raiding party to meet in the East Peaks near the lumber town when the moon was full again. There, the people of the towns chewed the forested foothills with their axes and saws. Many hundreds fouled the land with wasteful ways.

The raiding party was to wait in secret, and wait for a sign.

Fingerbones had been on his way to the waiting place when the dark spirit spoke again. The shaman had been traveling, wearily calming the scattered groups of the Wild Army. A year was long to the young warriors, and many wanted to make war, or return to their wives.

Hiding from the midday sun in a forested valley in the woods, Fingerbones had just settled back beside the coals of his fire when the flames danced up like there was wind.

And the dark spirit rose from the heat and smoke to hang over him. But it was not a dream. The voice was deeper. Its burning gaze held the heat of many eyes. The words were choked with breath from many throats.

It had said the dark spirit would come to the world and fight for the Wild Army. It would come to unite the tribes and bring an end to the people of the towns.

It would aid the Wild Army in their battle, but it needed a body.

And so Fingerbones heeded its words, and got it one.

The old shaman raised his eyes to look over at his captive.

Fingerbones had come upon an unguarded camp just after sundown. A man of the towns, a farmer or hunter, had ridden too far from home to return that night. He had been asleep when Fingerbones entered his tent. It was a small thing to club him senseless.

The man was tied and gagged. Streaks of blood crept over his features. He lay in the dirt and stared at Fingerbones through the flames.

There was terror in his face.

Fingerbones turned back to the fire. The dark spirit told him where to take the body. He would reach the place near the Savageland border when the sun was high next day.

13 – New Recruit

Joe Wood was fucking Corrie Orchard, and she seemed to be enjoying the experience as much as he. They were doing the deed at the back of the barn between the horse stalls. It was tough to get privacy around the Orchard place, what with all of Corrie's brothers about.

So they had to take the opportunity whenever and wherever it presented itself.

Joe was 18 years old. He was six and a half feet tall and as thick as a tree trunk—every stitch of him muscle. His strength came in handy around the family farm, since he was the oldest of nine children, and with his father having a broken back from getting trampled by an angry sow, much was left for him to do.

His father had no feeling or movement from the waist down since the accident, and the family was kept busy when not running the farm, with tending to his needs. He was still a competent horseman when tied in place, but was unable to do much more than boss when in that position, though once mounted he could play havoc on the farmhands with a long willow switch he'd snap over their heads.

Joe's father was not anyone's favorite. Even Joe's mother kept her distance once he was lifted into that saddle.

Since Joe was the oldest son, with a sister Rebecca a year older, much of the burden of running the farm fell to him. That might not have been bad if his father allowed him to do more than be a healthy set of arms and legs. But with the decision-making at Wood Farm showing no sign of being pried out of his father's hands, Joe's future looked grim.

Having no part in the final say made Joe feel like he was no better than the horse to which they tied his father. He could exercise his authority over Becky and his other siblings, and to some degree order the cowboys hired to wrangle the livestock, but everyone obeyed because he understood his father's likes and dislikes, and the old man agreed with Joe's opinions so much he often repeated them like they were his own.

But they feared his father more than they respected Joe.

The setup often left him feeling empty. He figured that chasing cattle, pulling stumps and raising pigs only held attraction if you owned the lot.

Mind you, such a situation also let responsibility fall to the old man, so Joe's mind was free to wander.

And he tended to wander after it.

That left him thrusting his pecker in and out of 15-year-old Corrie Orchard when he was supposed to be checking on a stretch of fence knocked over by a bear or some other beast going after the cows. He'd been on the way to do that when he realized the trip put him a half-day's ride from where Corrie and her family lived northeast of Wood Farm toward the mountains.

It was always worth the trip.

Her warm body reacted to his, giving as much softness as he was giving her hard. Corrie's sky blue eyes looked into his as dilated and open as the rest of her.

Her repetitive, "I love you, Joey's," had turned to rhythmic purring sounds and excited squeaks as Joe thrust away. Pretty much all he knew about sex had come from watching animals rut and from Corrie's eager interest, and so he had no way of knowing what all the noise was about, other than she smiled and chuckled too, so he quickly accepted that it was part of the process.

And she liked doing it a lot.

They had been sweethearts off and on, since Joe was 12. But his duties running the farm and being his father's *legs* had kept him too busy for marriage and family, something other young men pursued in the fifteenth or sixteenth year.

Since his father's injury, he had been too focused helping his mother raise his brothers and sisters to contemplate any family of his own. He knew that fucking with Corrie was likely to move events toward the family way, but he was accepting of the risk. Joe understood such an outcome would draw his father's wrath, but he was getting used to the willow switch, and was growing eager to take the blame for something that was his own.

Anyway, his brothers and sisters were old enough to help out around the farm and in recent months his mind had wandered more toward the Orchard place. Joe had begun visiting Corrie every chance he got and inviting her family over to the farm for Sunday picnics, since the Orchards tried to make it into Pandora City for supplies and such when they could.

Just as Joe's pecker throbbed deep inside Corrie's body and he felt the first wave of pleasure, a laugh came from the other side of the stall.

"Fuck her, Joey!" The laughter again. The voice was shrill and raspy, and belonged to one of Corrie's brothers.

Corrie's eyes widened at the sound, all pleasure draining from her face, but Joe was committed. He growled in the direction of the voice as his pecker exploded—his mind blanking momentarily in a wave of happiness.

"Joe!" Corrie's tone cut through the fun. "Joe! Get off me." He felt her soft hands on his shoulders, pushing. "Somebody saw us!"

"Yeah!" Joe thrust a couple more times and sighed. He climbed to his knees and hitched up his pants then glared around the barn looking for her youngest brother. "Just Bill I think." He looked at Corrie in time to see her wad her handkerchief between her legs and pull her underwear up and dress down.

He drew her to her feet.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” Corrie’s face looked half angry, half pleased. She was expecting something.

“He’s only curious cause he’s old enough to think it might be fun.” He slipped his hands around her waist. “Maybe I could scare him off the notion if I marry you and start a family.”

“Joe!” Corrie smiled, her arms tightened around his neck. “*You* pushing a baby carriage?”

“We’re already kissing up a tree.” He laughed when she grabbed his hands to see if any fingers were crossed, and then they hugged and turned like a dance. “I reckon, ‘until the cradle will fall,’ as they say.”

“Oh Joe,” Corrie sighed.

Kissing her, he said, “Just as soon as I get back.”

Corrie’s displeasure was immediate. Joe had seen it happen in his mother and sisters. Paradise twinkling in their eyes one moment and then it was all brimstone and homework.

“Then you’re really going...” Her eyes began to fill with tears.

“Like we talked.” He smoothed her shoulders with his large hands. “You know I’ve got to do this.”

“But why?” She stepped away from him, and then turned to pick at the board that ran atop the stall.

“Because, I’d feel safer raising a family if I could get myself military trained.” He kicked at some straw.

“But you’re already good with that old longcat,” she sighed.

Joe nodded. He had found a Red Rider longcat when he was all of eight years old. He’d been out shooting groundhogs by the creek and there it was, lying like someone forgot it when getting a drink.

He had kept it hidden in the barn for years, afraid his father would take it away, and he practiced with it in the early morning or late evening or any chance he got.

“I only learned to play with that thing,” he whispered smiling. “Imagine what I could do if I got showed proper.”

Corrie’s shoulders shook as she stifled a sob.

“Come on Corrie, if I do a tour of duty with the Red Riders, I’ll be able to go into the reserve service. Then, I can protect my family, you and any children that we get. *And* I’ll have friends in the Red Riders.”

She whipped toward him. “But that could be two years!” Her full lips quivered. “I’m going to be an old hag when you get back.”

“New recruits always get posted riding the southern edge of the Territory.” Emotion flickered through his resolve. *She had a way.* “I can come back here for any leave I get.”

“They go to the south ‘cause’ it’s most dangerous, and you learn the hard way.” She dabbed at her eyes with the hem of her skirt exposing a soft white thigh in the process. “Anyway, why would you want to go off and fight Savages? You’ve got all of Wood Farm to protect!”

“My brother Kenny’s 16. He can take over my duties while I’m away. I’ve been training him to pick up the slack.” Joe reached out and pulled her close. “And fighting Savages, well I’ve got the feeling I’ll be fighting them here soon, anyway.” Joe watched concern cloud Corrie’s face. “You remember the Waymeets.” The Waymeets were a family of homesteaders just a day’s ride to the east. On a dark night six months before, Savages

butchered them in their sleep—from the gruesome way the bodies were used, most thought it was Irawk work.

“With military training, I’ll be able to teach my brothers, and all the men and women at the other farms.” He kissed her soft mouth. “Corrie, this way we can have a family, and grow them up safe.”

She looked down at her feet for a minute, then up into his eyes. “I suppose you’ll think yourself quite handsome in your uniform.”

“Mostly when I’m out of it!” Joe laughed, pulling her down on the straw again.

He was ready for another go.

Corrie resisted momentarily. “But Bill...” Her eyes cast around over the stalls.

“Well, he better get here in a hurry if he wants to watch. I’m feeling urgent.” Joe kissed her hard, and then ground his hips against her. He didn’t care if anyone saw them. He loved Corrie and she loved him. Joe’s hands ran over her firm hips, pulled the swell of her belly toward him. The smell of her hair was like oats and hay—fresh as the Greenbelt.

He moaned. But instead of Corrie’s joyful sigh, he heard *laughter?* Joe kissed her harder, and then was surprised by a voice—suddenly deep and low.

“*You love me, don’t you Joey?*” But before he could answer he heard more laughter, many men’s voices now, and it wasn’t her brother Bill either. He tried to lift his head, but his muscles resisted, slowed him—then, he opened his eyes.

Joe was lying on a bed of straw. Around him, the men of the Pandora Red Rider Troop stood howling with delight. Even the old one-eyed Cotton could not contain his humor, displaying a yellowed stump of a tooth in merriment. Joe flushed with embarrassment as he remembered. *A dream...* But the memory only tormented him; it could not protect him from his comrades.

“Come on now, *loverboy!*” the half-wit, Private Cellars crowed as he kissed an imaginary face in front of him. “That’s it. Buck them hips, Joey!” He hooted like a wild man.

Harry Stokes, another private like Joe, and usually an ally, suddenly pitched in. “By God, boy. You’re about as horny as a young man’s got a right to be!” He clapped Private Greenlawn across the shoulders. “If my mare drops a bastard—I know the father.”

The best Joe could do in the way of defense was to spit at the ground beside him, then knock the straw out of his boots and pull them on.

“I got to take a piss,” he growled at the other cavalymen then climbed to his feet. Joe knew he was still the biggest man in the troop, and that he could whip any three of the men around him. But as Stokes had told him a hundred times, it was his sense of humor that got him the shit end of the stick. The fellows in the troop knew he wouldn’t beat the tar out of them just for joking around.

And it was true.

Joe was already seeing the humor in it—was having a hard time hiding his grin. Just the same, he pushed through the ring of men mumbling, “Kick your asses!” and “Goddamn sleep talking,” before making his way out of the barn.

He moved to the fence that circled a small corral behind the drive shed. *Corrie!*

Unbuttoning his fly, he saw that his pecker was still half swollen with the memory, and for a second he considered knocking the rekindled passion out of his system, but memory of his comrades forced him to get on about business.

His dream had been a replay of a day not long before he joined the Red Riders, and things hadn't gone quite the way he'd planned once he enlisted. He'd only managed to get home once, and that was a month after he joined up. Even then, it was to a hell of a homecoming.

Corrie was as angry as a flea-bit mule.

Since then, he'd seen the Southern Territory from the east to west. They did lots of training and rode the borderlands in a seven-month tour.

Four days ago they had headed toward the East Peaks with plans to loop up to Fort Phoenix—a regular patrol, but not without its excitement.

Early on the second day they'd started along the northern shore of Dry Lake. It stretched east for almost a day's ride until it caught up to the Dead Rivers that crawled and turned their way out of the mountains. The lake itself was choked with dry grasses, cottonwood and willow, with tight and thorny cactus patches.

Red Rider veterans said there were ways through it, but that only a fool would take the chance getting caught in all those dry square miles of nothing.

The troop had kept to the northern edge of the wilderness, trending northeast.

Another patrol, and this without a leave of absence.

Corrie would be pissed, *if* she hadn't moved on to another man.

And all our plans for nothing.

He'd received no word from her before his troop left Pandora, and he'd barely had time to mail her his own letter. It was starting to be such a long time to his young mind that he wondered if she'd recognize him at all whenever he did return. Of course, the troop was still days away from Fort Phoenix. They had taken shelter in a barn on an abandoned farm once owned by the Goldring clan. They'd been burned out by Apa, and the survivors headed to the center towns for safety.

The troop had been caught on open ground one day after leaving Pandora, when that weird lightning storm had hit. It was a funny one. Joe had worked the land, grew up on it and he'd never seen the lightning like it was that day. *And no rain.* Sighing wistfully, Joe put his pecker away and walked back toward the barn.

He'd be getting enough ribbing as it was. Getting caught playing with himself would not help matters at all.

14 - The Dark Spirit Rises

Bones and feathers littered the dark dirt around the half-buried corpse.

Fingerbones reined his horse to a halt to survey the scene, his fist tightening around the oak haft of his war club.

This had to be the place.

His captive's mount took three extra steps on its lead pulling up alongside. Fingerbones had tied the man over his horse. At its hooves, a dark hat protruded from the dirt amid the litter of bones.

But what kind of place?

The prisoner had exhausted himself by straining at his bindings for most of the morning. Now the man craned his neck until he could see over his horse's mane and a frightened gasp shot past the leather strip that gagged him.

Fingerbones frowned and studied the faded tracks that led up to the body. The wind had moved the sand, had almost rubbed the footprints smooth, but the old shaman knew the ways of tracking and how to read the truth in what little was left.

It was just a feeling but...

This man had walked a long way before dying—staggered and fell many times before the end. *But who?* It looked like a man of the towns from his torn clothing, from the bloodstained gun belt that stuck out of the debris.

The boots and legs bent up out of a shallow grave that was scooped in the sandy soil. By the marks around it, Fingerbones read that the walker had buried himself before he died.

Strong spirit. Strong magic, too...

A flock of vultures had gathered to feast on the corpse, but they too had died. That story was told by the litter of bird bones, broken skeletons and the tufts of feathers that were pushed about by the wind and caught in clumps of scrubgrass.

But how did they die?

Fingerbones grunted and climbed off his horse.

His captive made a frightened noise, a squawk that brought a grim smile to the old shaman's dark features.

Pray to your dead god now, man of the towns.

The old shaman paced toward the open grave, leading the animals by a beaded rein.

Other carrion eaters had devoured the dead birds before scavenging the half-buried man. Fingerbones read more signs in the sand.

Something bigger, a badger had caught hold of the body by the neck and pulled the torso up out of the ground. Fingerbones counted the faded footprints. *Two* badgers then, or *one* with six legs. Yes, he could only read that six distinct paws had disturbed the sand.

Once exposed, the body had been torn open and its organs eaten.

More vultures must have come and picked the face clean—scraped the shoulders and stripped the ribs before the muscle dried hard.

Scavengers had to work quickly under the Savageland sun. It dried flesh on the bone, toughened it like rope in its rays.

The body had been here for days.

Fingerbones looked up at the sun, then back at the eastern horizon. He'd left Dry Lake at dawn and headed west keeping the Sun Spear Mountain at his back. The tall sliver of broken rock loomed over the East Peaks like a lance sharpened and polished by the sky spirits. Then he gazed into the west to catch the distant shimmer of a Dream Lake, and beyond it the first humps of the Western Mountains.

This was the place.

Fingerbones had set his last camp in a clearing well into the thorny forest that had grown up to fill the southern edge of Dry Lake. Cottonwood, willow, thorn bushes and cactus had followed the receding waters long ago, and still dug their roots deep to pull at the dregs. Legend said the lake was killed in the old war, when the people of the towns did something wrong to the land.

Summer storms could still stir up minor freshets to pass along the Dead Rivers and moisten its shores, but it was only a matter of time. The Dry Lake would one day be dead.

The old shaman had been a day's ride to the east when the dark spirit said he needed a body. He'd been going among the forested hills where the Dead Rivers started winding westward. Not long before he'd been at a camp with warriors of the Irawk Magnum Clan. A small group, but fiercely painted and armed, they were some of the first parts of the Wild Army that had come to that place.

The Wild Army that Fingerbones had set upon the path to war.

He glanced at the Sun Spear again.

He looked down at the corpse.

The dark spirit needs a new body indeed.

Fingerbones drew the horses away and hobbled them with lengths of leather rope.

He hummed as he did it. A protection spell, he called on the hunters of the air. They could keep watch with their keen eyes and warn him if enemies approached.

This was not safe.

His captive misread the song and renewed his struggles. Or did some instinct tell him the end was near?

What that end was, Fingerbones did not know. He'd been told to bring a body to this place and to sing the Song of the Dead Lands.

He cut the leather strap that bound his captive's hands and feet together over the saddle. The man yelped as he fell, and grunted when he hit the ground hard.

Fingerbones grabbed the rope that held his ankles and dragged him through the vulture bones toward the corpse.

He cut away the man's gag but left him tied some eight feet from the open grave.

Then Fingerbones paced away to sit cross-legged in the sand near the horses.

"Goddamn heathen Savage!" growled the man of the towns. When taking water before, he had begged for freedom in plain-talk, but Fingerbones had only shrugged and slipped the gag back into place.

He had no interest in his captive's words.

Just lies.

"You let me up," the man gasped, rolling onto his belly. "I never done nothing to you!" He coughed on dust, and then he sneezed.

Fingerbones curled his fingers into the wings of a hawk and crossed the shape over his heart. He started singing the Song of the Dead Lands, his voice rising high and keening. Irawk warriors sang it over their dead or dying comrades, and if a wounded warrior had time, he'd sing it over himself before he died.

"I said, *let me go!*" the man ordered, his voice a frightened croak. He glared at the old shaman, and Fingerbones knew the look.

The man of the towns was wishing he had a gun. He was thinking of the ways he'd kill the Savage.

"God damn you to Hell!" snarled the man of the towns.

And the wind went still.

The horses whinnied with fear, and fussed at their hobbles.

Fingerbones sang.

Then clicking, snapping noises clattered all around.

But it wasn't wind...

More clicking.

The earth trembled.

More snapping.

The captive twisted, contorted his body to see that...

All around him the splintered, half-eaten vulture skeletons were moving.

Fingerbones paused at the sight—heart quivering, before he charged ahead with his song—hoping to hide within its magic.

The man of the towns was ringed by quivering, shaking, trembling bits of bird skeleton. Bones articulated, joined by sinew or dried muscle had come to horrible life—twitching in the sun as the man screamed and struggled and wept.

And then the movement stopped. The earth quit shaking and the bones fell lifeless on the sand.

Fingerbones' captive glared at him in desperation, his eyes pleading, furious, near madness.

But a high creaky noise kept him quiet. Like leather rope, it sounded, pulled tight enough to break.

The captive's face contorted with terror, but he did not turn his eyes until a harsh hissing gasp split the air.

Fingerbones felt his own hair prickle and bowels grow heavy with fear.

He raised his voice in song.

The half-buried body shrugged off a layer of dirt.

His captive screamed.

Then a spasm ran through the corpse, its legs kicked and a gout of sand blew from between its fleshless jaws.

“Oh Lord protect me!” the man of the towns wept and struggled to rise.

The corpse shook again, and then its jaws worked open and snapped in the air. It kicked, and its boots caught the edge of the shallow grave.

A growl came from the open chest as it strained with its legs, started to push itself up out of the earth.

Fingerbones kept singing, hoping the sign of the hawk was enough to protect him.

The body shook, squirmed and wriggled out of the ground, dark forces animating the thing; its ribs flaring open like long yellow teeth.

The man of the towns was weeping, begging. He struggled to his feet, and screamed as the corpse swam free of its grave.

The man tried to hop, but his bound ankles caused his knees to buckle and he fell.

Fingerbones sang, his hands shifting to the sign of the snake as the corpse rolled out of the hole and onto its belly. It raised its fleshless face to sniff the air.

Empty eye sockets cast blindly about and then the thing growled lustily as it caught the man's scent.

Fingerbones' captive was on his stomach, his bound hands under him. He inched and wriggled toward the shaman, pleading.

Glancing back, he screamed.

The corpse snapped its teeth and started crawling forward, a low hungry hiss coming from its open chest. Its skeletal hips twisted, slipped out of the gun belt, left the weapons in the sand.

And for a moment, Fingerbones lost his place. The singing stopped. He gasped as the corpse charged on all fours like a lizard, a burst of speed and it climbed onto his captive's back.

The man of the towns screamed as the thing rolled him over, as its bony fingers ripped his shirt and coat aside and exposed his pale stomach.

“Oh God help me!” he begged, as the corpse reared its head and its jaws opened wide.

Fingerbones found his voice to sing as the thing bit into the man’s belly, as blood spurting.

The man shrieked in terror and pain as his gut muscles tore.

As the corpse ripped him open.

A great wet sound followed, as the thing pushed its head and neck into the hole it had torn in the man.

The captive screamed and struggled and started shaking. Terror and shock would kill him soon.

And the living corpse set its hands against the man’s hips and pulled, and tugged until its head slid back out of the torso dripping blood; scarlet dribbled from a great wad of liver that was clamped between its jaws.

The thing’s empty eye sockets turned to Fingerbones as it chewed, its attention suddenly captured by the shaman’s song.

Then it hissed, and dug into the torso again.

The captive trembled a final time and lay still as the thing ate his organs, and hollowed out a place.

The corpse spread the ugly wound wide and started crawling in.

Fingerbones watched it kick its boots off and push up into the open abdomen, twist and drag its legs in.

The old shaman was surprised that the creature could fit in the man of the town.

But the corpse curled up inside was mostly bones.

It wouldn’t take up much space folded there between the ribs.

Fingerbones kept singing until the man of the towns opened his eyes and started moving again.

His bound hands dropped over his torn vitals, pulled the edges together.

He turned to look at the shaman.

“Cut me loose,” the corpse in the man said, “and bring me rawhide thread to close this hole.”

15 – Back from the Brink

They set up the wounded Rider’s sickbed two doors down from Maria Puta’s rooms. A safe distance, John Doctor reckoned, if they hoped to cure him. Sporting cowboys was a noisy business that he believed might slow the injured man’s healing—even if the sound of it could cheer the spirit of a healthy fellow.

Maria Puta was a young whore who used to ride with the bangero Wolfpacks out of Gramma’s Place in the Western Mountains. She wasn’t much more than 25 years but already had enough ink on her smooth, caramel-colored skin to make her an exotic attraction: especially where the gang-sign she sported told anyone who could read it that she had been married to a high-ranking veterano. The fellow’s letters were written on the inside of her left forearm.

The rumors said that Maria caught him with another woman and stabbed him dead with his own longcat. Since he was a veterano with lots of ink and accompanying power, Maria had to give up the pack-life to service cowboys in Pandora City. Some decent folks wanted her run off, but she'd broken no laws of fairplay and her business partner, Horace Skinker, was always quick to come to the defense of any entrepreneur.

And Maria Puta's allures made her a going concern, compared to the other girls who worked the Tower Hotel and the Halladay Inn.

Sheriff Judd Elliot sat in a wooden chair at the end of the Rider's bed.

It hadn't taken long to figure out that he was looking at a gunfighter. A study of the big .45's in the worn and dusty holsters showed fine-tuned killing machines under a layer of surface dirt. The weapons had been meticulously cleaned and cared for and their wooden grips were polished from use.

He had the look too.

And he had suffered, this one.

John Doctor found a patchwork of old injuries under his rank and frayed clothing. There were scars from bullet wounds, and cuts and stab marks from knives or longcats as well. So Doctor diagnosed the gunman as either the luckiest man alive, or some kind of walking dead and immune to such things as death.

That was an appraisal the sheriff asked him to keep under his hat, though he knew it was meant in jest—even if old wives tales said such things were once true. The people of Pandora had too much time on their hands to be given the gruesome grist for their rumor mill.

Talk of walking dead hit people hard, and they had enough trouble drawing life out of the Territory without confusing real dangers with that particular fantasy. There were lots of tall tales about the world before the final war, but only a fool would believe the dead could rise.

The dead do not walk—period.

"I'll tell you this, Sheriff," Doctor had said, on the third night after the Rider's arrival. "I've never seen a fellow recover this quickly. He was as good as dead." The physician had rubbed his chin looking thoughtful. "Of course, luck always plays a part, as them old scars show."

"I expect it would," the sheriff had agreed. It didn't make sense that a fellow could heal quicker than others, but Judd was just a sheriff with a bad history, so he was quick to take the opinions of others. And luck had a hand in everything.

The day the gunfighter came into town, John Doctor had assured Judd that he was too sick to lift a pistol even if they had been stupid enough to leave the weapons in reach. And the day following it, the stranger had fallen into a fevered state that left him unconscious for most of the day. In his delirium, the man had muttered in a language that reminded Doctor of the words from old medical paper-books and of the jabber the Preacher was known to spout.

The Rider was becoming more of a mystery than the sheriff liked.

So when Judd got word that the stranger had taken coffee and choked down a few bites of toast—four days after he arrived—the sheriff had hurried over to talk to the man.

But just his luck, the stranger was asleep when he got there, so Judd made the best of his bad timing and helped himself to a couple of strips of bacon, and a piece of toast from the man's neglected breakfast. He didn't bother with the sticky mound of cold beans.

And he waited, idly listening to the lowing of Pandora City's dwindling herd of beef cattle in the Yards nearby. He knew Tanny's boys would wait for the day to cool before they'd run them up to grazing land north of town.

That got him thinking about the overdue Ironmine Outfit. As the season drove toward summer, Sticky Pickard wouldn't want to push a herd through the Savagelands under a killing sun, so if he wasn't back soon, it was starting to look like the worst had happened and they'd run afoul of Savages.

Judd had already been fending off suggestions from many a local to go riding south looking for them. He was reluctant to lead a scouting expedition into the same wastelands that might have just claimed a whole cattle drive.

Still, he knew that every town in the Territory would soon be looking at their shrinking herds and wondering about Sticky's crew.

Have to do something soon.

The Rider took a deep breath, but kept sleeping.

On the day of his arrival, Doctor and Samuel Farmer undressed the man, collected his clothes for washing, and stored his other possessions in the closet. It wouldn't be fairplay to confiscate his guns, as were the rules, but they unloaded them and gave Judd the bullets. There wasn't more by way of weapons but a well-worn hunting knife and scabbard. Judd did find a few gold pieces, considered taxing the man, but decided to leave them in the stranger's pocket for a voluntary payment later.

The sheriff wiped at his long moustache, studying the gunfighter's face. He was having a hard time pinning an age down. There were plenty of white whiskers straggling through the beard, giving it a grayish look, but the rest of that and what made up the shaggy full head was brown and shiny with only threads of silver. The lines around the eyes were etched deep, and the tanned forehead was a well-furrowed field, but the skin on the dark hands and pale body, though lined where you'd expect it, had an elastic and healthy look to it that belied great age. There were traces of white hair at his temples, but only traces.

Once his trail-worn clothing had been set aside, he didn't look so broken down. He was well-muscled, with contours etched from privation, and had only a medium amount of body hair. This observation caught the sheriff's eye because though he himself was fair-haired, his own body was covered with brown spiky whiskers like a timber wolf's.

He crunched on the last mouthful of bacon.

"It's been a long time," the Rider whispered suddenly. The shade was down, so his face was hidden in shadow.

Judd covered his surprise by moving over and pulling the shade up. The sun burned down on the dusty street outside. The day was heating up, and soon the few people he saw below would take refuge from the sun. He turned.

The Rider had thrown a hand up to shield his eyes.

"What do you mean, 'it's been a long time?'" The sheriff was puzzled. "Do I know you?"

"Not really," the Rider said and smiled. "I guess I meant: I've been here a long time."

"Oh. I've never met anyone who '*guessed*' he meant something. Seems a strange turn of the tongue," Judd grumbled, pulled his chair up closer to the bed and sat. "But you're likely addled. It's been four days since you come into town." He tried to hide his anxiety. "And I'd like to know a thing or two before you leave."

“*Four days!*” The Rider frowned. Wincing, he pushed himself into a sitting position against the pillows. “Anyone follow?”

“If you mean by them what injured you? No.” The sheriff glanced at the window. “Should we expect company?” He didn’t want trouble, and that was all gunfighters could bring him. If Judd had found the Rider first, he might have run him off then.

The stranger looked thoughtful, like he was ciphering numbers, before shaking his head. “Not likely.”

“Not likely? Well, I’ve heard better answers...” Judd smiled through his thick moustache. “I’m Sheriff Judd Elliot, and you’re in Pandora City, if you’ve forgotten.” He gave the man a steady look. “Who are you?”

“I didn’t mean to come here.” The Rider frowned. “Better if you don’t know.”

“Let’s skip the introductions, then.” The sheriff smiled. “I don’t recognize you from any of my wanted posters over at the jailhouse, and you done no harm here, so I suppose you could leave town as quick as you’re ready.” Judd felt conflicted being brusque, but ‘neighborly’ often equated with ‘naive’ this close to the Savagelands. “I won’t bother asking where you’re headed, neither.”

The Rider grimaced as he shifted on the bed. Sweat was building up on his forehead.

“Why look for trouble?” Judd said and shrugged.

“I can head out at sunset.” The man mopped his brow.

“I don’t mean to be inhospitable, but I’d like it if you could.” Judd was embarrassed. “I’d ask you to leave five gold pieces for room and board and Doctor’s time.”

The Rider nodded.

“Your guns are in the closet with the rest of your gear. Your horse and tack are in the stable behind the jailhouse. One of Tanny’s boys come over and saw to it when he mucked out the stagecoach company animals.” The sheriff felt a weight lifting off his shoulders, and he realized the gunman’s presence had been riding him toward a drink. “I’ll bring your bullets back at sunset and you’ll be off.”

“Thanks.” The Rider’s expression softened. The hair on his chest was matted with sweat. He paled, settling back against the pillows.

“Thank us by taking your troubles elsewhere.” Judd stood up holding his hat by the brim and turning it. He took a slow pace to the door and paused. “I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t find out what might come along after you. Was it Savages? Bangeros? That ain’t no Red Rider longcat wound is it?”

The gunman blinked at his hands where they crossed in his lap. “I ran into some trouble with a young Savage—I think he was *Cheyokee*, at an abandoned farm about a day and a half ride southeast of here.” Crimson colored his cheeks. “I guess we came up on the same waterhole. He got nervous, stabbed me and rode off.”

“There a shack and a covered well there?” Judd set his hand on the doorknob, watching the gunman hesitate before nodding. “Well, that’s the old Harrison Place, though I can generally make it there in a day. You may have wandered. They was one of the first families to settle that far out, and the first to die by Savage hands after the Last Expansion and the fall of Fort Gregory.” Judd was surprised to feel his face flush with shame. He remembered Fort Gregory burning behind him as he rode. “But it’s a bit out of my jurisdiction so I guess we’ll leave it at that.”

He turned the knob and pulled the door open to find Miss Teacher, John Doctor and Horace Skinker close up by the frame, with ears turned for eavesdropping.

“*Well!*” Judd said, stepping out into the hall and closing the door. “That ain’t fairplay nor nothing.”

“Neither is running off a sick man, Sheriff!” Miss Teacher set her fists on her narrow hips.

“We don’t want his trouble,” Judd assured, “and he don’t want us to have it.”

“I’m concerned about infection,” Doctor said. “Though I agree with you concerning his trouble.”

“And what are you going to do about that Savage?” Skinker growled. “Can’t have them poking holes in poor travelers.”

“You mean poor *customers*.” Judd’s breath caught in his throat, and he felt a powerful urge for a drink. He took a step past the eavesdroppers toward the stairs. He could hear a piano going down there. Someone was playing something sweet and musical. It would be enjoyable to drink by. *Ten steps to the bar from the bottom of the stairs*. His heart suddenly raced. “He said there was only one that stabbed him and rode off. Danger’s passed.”

“Sheriff, you know where there’s one Savage there’s more.” Skinker pointed a finger at him. “And there’s been trouble in the east, and on the road to Fort Phoenix.”

“That’s Irawk! The Rider said his Savage was *Cheyokee*,” Judd insisted, glaring at the barkeep’s finger. A sudden flush colored his features. “And we’re doing just as much to stir them up going and poking around out there.”

“Cheyokees coming north is even worse!” Skinker snarled.

“As acting mayor *and* sheriff of Pandora City, you have an obligation to investigate and see if there’s a threat,” Miss Teacher scolded and the others nodded.

Judd looked at them solemnly. He knew that superstitions about the dead aside, Savages were the greatest fear among the people of the towns. *His too*.

“You want me to ride out there?” Judd asked, his anxiety rising.

Why not ride out and just keep going?

“It might be wise,” John Doctor said seriously.

“How can we protect our investments in this town, if we don’t understand the threats?” Skinker puffed out his thin chest.

“And it’s your duty, Sheriff,” Miss Teacher said, blushing. “Whenever I question your abilities, people remind me that you were a hero in the Red Riders once; well, this is an opportunity for you to prove it.”

“Hell,” Judd sighed, realizing any delay at the Harrison Place would mean he’d likely miss the Ghost Girl Roundup—the only damn thing worth looking forward to in Pandora. “I guess you’re right, though it won’t feel so wise once I’m riding in Savage country.” He looked along the hall. Distantly he’d noticed the rhythmic bang of a headboard hitting a wall. He smiled when Miss Teacher heard it too and blushed.

“Well, Doctor would you get your boy to ride over to Samuel Farmer’s place and tell him to come in the morning? I’ll leave a note telling him he’s been deputized for a couple days.” He smiled harshly. “Every other man in town’s off on the Ironmine drive.”

The sheriff started along the hall, working up his will to walk past the bar at the bottom of the stairs. The music was still drawing him.

It looked like he was going to get the Rider’s trouble anyway.

16 – The Teacher

Evelyn Teacher finished marking the test papers and piled them on her desk to distribute the following morning. She picked up the leather case she used to carry her paper-books and teaching supplies, and slung it over her shoulder before pausing at the door to give the room a final look.

All neat and tidy.

It was 25 minutes past two o'clock and the children were needed back home for their chores. They'd disappeared seconds after she'd announced the time.

Every day she got them from ten in the morning until two except for Saturday and Sunday. Their farming and laboring parents were always in need of extra hands to make ends meet—it was why people had families these days. Considering the risks of sickness and deformation, it was clearly a necessity.

The lives these children led were rough and busy so she felt lucky to get them at all. Making a life for oneself on the farmland north of Pandora, or anywhere in the Territory, was a full time occupation. And most of the parents she knew had little or no interest in *extra* education for themselves. They only wanted to know what they had to know.

Surprisingly the Preacher supported her—calling knowledge a tool of Christ—though the support stopped there. Evelyn Teacher and the Preacher differed widely on the scope of that knowledge. Their debates over curriculum were becoming legendary, and though she had grown to detest the strident little man, she knew she needed him.

He was all that stood between the schoolhouse and the Pandora City Temperance League's interference. That intemperate group was more inflexible than the Preacher, and would offer her street-side lectures regarding the dangers of information. Without the Preacher's grudging approval of Miss Teacher's secular curriculum, she felt sure the League would have her giving Bible studies and classes on social etiquette.

Deep down, Evelyn knew the education her students were receiving was rudimentary to say the least; but it was better than nothing. She, herself, had higher hopes, though she tried not to set her personal goals on the shoulders of her pupils. They were involved, since they would be the inheritors of whatever she accomplished, but they could hardly be blamed for the world they found themselves in. To give them credit, they did well with what they had, and got what they needed.

It was a world with very practical concerns. Rebuilding a civilization wasn't as easy as learning the 'A-B-C's'. It required a lot of 'hands-on' labor.

Just the same Miss Teacher had plans of her own. Her mother had taught her the letters as she had been taught by *her* mother; a tradition that went back to the first days of the Territory. And one day if the right fellow ever came along, Miss Teacher would pass the knowledge to children of her own. In the meantime she had been given the sacred duty of carrying some of the ancient paper-books.

The rare documents in keeping at schoolhouses throughout the Territory had been preserved from before the time in the woods. Others were salvaged from the ruins of dead cities that protruded in pieces in the Savagelands, and clustered in the poison world beyond the mountains. More eclectic titles were collected as curiosities by travelers and adventurers and others purchased dearly from garbage miners who prospected as far away as the Gap to Dead Places in the East Peaks.

Teachers and schools became the keepers of such things because the paper-books held the keys to language, science and mathematics. Just the same, a great deal had been lost in the way of written knowledge. Legend said that in the time before the long childhood, books were made into *electric* things that you could only read on machines. And when the machines were lost, well...

Reading was the key, and some paper-books were salvaged. And while reading opened many doors, Miss Teacher feared there were some concepts that had been lost forever.

Gregory's papers preserved in the capitol recounted the time before the towns were built. The old world had burned away in war. The rampant disease and starvation that followed only intensified the loss of knowledge as it reduced the lifespan of the average person, and replaced the need to know with the realities of survival. So parents had to teach their children only what they had to know, and children had fewer reasons for greater knowledge when farming, tree planting and animal husbandry were the tools they depended on.

But Miss Teacher had high hopes. She knew that if she could master the disciplines herself, that the same could be encouraged in her pupils, and that some one or other of them might build on that which she obtained. This was an important process, she knew, because the ancient paper-books were slowly disintegrating, and new ones were needed to replace them. The Preacher was working on a method, but he was inspired by the need to make more Bibles.

It was still early for the people of the towns, and Miss Teacher would have to do her able best while she was in the land of the living.

She pulled twice on the schoolhouse door to be sure it was locked—grumbling as she did so about Mr. Carpenter's apparent inability to fix the problem. He seemed better at lounging with the other men in front Skinker's Saloon than he was at stopping a door from sticking in its frame.

Shaking her head at the evidence of low educational standards, she shouldered her bag and made her way down School Hill past a neighborhood of small homes that hugged the southern slope—these were inhabited by cattlemen's families—wood frame buildings of one or two rooms.

A similar neighborhood called Church Mount had grown up on the hill below the church, though it tended to attract the more prosperous and devout of Pandora's inhabitants—craft and tradesmen who supported the cattle industry that had grown up around the Greenbelt Trail.

As she passed down the quarter mile of road, she glanced across at the church. The walls were of stained black wood that contrasted with the white mortar used in the chinking between the logs. Thin windows were cut at intervals, simple narrow rectangles with plain glass that reflected the Preacher's austere view of life.

Dark smoke curled up from behind the tall building.

Then she looked to the scaffolding that had grown up around the bell tower where the wood was being covered by a grim facing of flat rock.

Renovations needed for the adoration of God, no doubt. She clicked her tongue.

While children did without schoolbooks.

A high steeple of white wood perched atop the bell tower overlooking the road. A hard iron cross grew up from this.

Miss Teacher remembered the church bell clanging violently during the big storm—*what was it almost a week ago?* It had been a horrific and startling sound, marking the pace of the powerful winds for most of the disturbance until it finally, quite suddenly stopped.

It was the Preacher's tradition to ring the bell for early prayer and to end the working day; but it had been silent since the storm.

Miss Teacher had noticed that the Preacher's acolyte, Calibani, had been struggling atop the scaffolding all week, undoubtedly trying to fix the bell before his master returned from a personal pilgrimage.

The Preacher was expected back any day, and Miss Teacher knew the arguments with her would begin soon after.

Miss Teacher's thoughts shifted to what she had recently read about language and syntax. It truly seemed irrelevant to her, to know it, yet she understood that it had an important place in oral and written communications. But how could she teach the children this, if *she* found it boring? Life didn't need all the nuts and bolts of language just now, but what would happen when it did?

Society in Pandora City was slowly acquiring some of the more genteel aspects, but it did not get around the fact that human understanding was still far behind its apparent successes. There was only *reinvention* and without the tools for invention, there were only shallow victories. After all, John Doctor could still do little more than wash an infected wound with vinegar or alcohol—and amputation was still his best solution if that technique failed.

The reason this frustrated the teacher was she had also taken into her trust certain other texts. These books related stories about the times before the war. Though difficult to read, the books described a world where things were much, much different. Where life was not so hard, and people lived long, long lives of leisure.

One such book, a moldering old thing, had told of a time when there were cities lit by oil, where people whisked between buildings in horseless wagons supported on smooth black bands of stone. But there was never enough time to study the works, never enough to grasp the whole story.

And the one person who might have been able to assist her in it would have nothing to do with the notion.

As sweet a disposition as the Preacher could adopt for his congregation, his defense of the Bible caused him to forget any such niceties. Evelyn Teacher knew that the Bible stories were important, being the living account of events about God, but she felt that they didn't give them a better understanding of *their* world. The Bible seemed impractical, compared to the texts that hinted at the life that was.

He flew into a rage once over her attempt to decipher the meaning of a few ragged pages from a book called *Jurassic—something*. The torn paper hid the rest of the title.

“Foolishness bordering on sacrilege, Miss Teacher!” His cheeks went red with fury when he yelled. “Those times and *that science* brought about the end of the world. Why would we, possessors of the future of mankind, need to know about the past—especially a past that almost led to our destruction?” His participation would never be won—a loss of support that Miss Teacher keenly felt.

The Preacher possessed knowledge of written language more comprehensive than her own, learned at Bible studies and in the seminary up in Babylon City. And she had heard

him use some of the strange words from the old texts that she still found incomprehensible.

But the vehemence of his refusal kept her from pressing the issue. The Preacher held enormous power over his congregation, and more than once he had cast a suspicious eye on the things she taught her students. She was already required to follow the Preacher's Social Conscience Guidelines regarding the saying of prayers before class and she did not want to encourage more.

Caught up in her thoughts, Miss Teacher suddenly realized she was walking in the middle of Main Street. She stopped herself, blushing, and moved to the sidewalk—but slowed when she saw a figure sitting on the plank steps in front of Hardware's Equipment Company.

It was the mysterious Rider.

He sat on the bottom step, his long legs thrown out before him. He had pulled off his hat and was rubbing his hair. It was pasted to his head with sweat. His white horse stood by him looking strong but weary, hanging its head like its reins weighed a hundred pounds.

From the Rider's rumpled and dusty condition, she realized he'd just fallen off his horse.

His eyebrows leapt when he saw her, and he jammed his hat back onto his head. He struggled to his feet as Miss Teacher hurried over.

"Now you just wait one minute," she said, afraid her voice came out too shrill. "Sheriff Judd is running you off too early."

She steadied the Rider as he swayed forward to collect his horse's reins.

He straightened and nodded, hesitated and then touched the brim of his hat.

"Sheriff was charitable to give me another night's sleep—and now I delayed half the day," the Rider said, clearing his throat. "I'm good to go, just got dizzy." His eyes tipped up at the sky. The air was hot around them.

"Look at you," Miss Teacher insisted, startled by her forwardness. "You should not be out of bed." She blushed and lightened her tone. "And your horse appears unconvinced."

The Rider smiled weakly, stroked the white mane. "We've been together a long time and he has his heart set on retirement." The Rider's eyes blinked slowly, and sweat ran down his left cheek.

"I won't have it!" Miss Teacher scolded. "You ride when you're good and ready. The sheriff may not want trouble, but he does not speak for all of us. We're no cowards and are ready to pay our bills and do a day's work. Our right to fairplay is no greater than your own."

"Sheriff's right," the Rider said, face white. "It's his job to protect you."

"Since he left this morning to investigate your attack, I suggest it is up to his deputy *to run you off.*" Miss Teacher looked across the street to the jailhouse. She knew Samuel Farmer would never allow a man in the Rider's condition to suffer in the saddle. "As I understand it, you've paid for your stay and trouble, and it's only fairplay that a man is free in the Territory until he breaks a law. I'll help you back to Skinker's Saloon, and *bed.*"

The Rider's eyes happened to catch hers at the word 'bed' and she blushed again.

“Maybe I’ll lie down a spell,” the Rider agreed finally, taking a few uncertain steps. “Get my balance.”

“And, once you get your balance,” Miss Teacher said, appraising the man’s form, “I’m sure you’re capable of dealing with whatever trouble may be following you.”

17 – A Change of Scene

“By God, Boto, you’re a strange one!” Judd chuckled at the hermit, and then shrugged his shoulders. *But some mysteries are worth keeping.*

The sheriff’s right side was seared by the sun’s rays and his backside was no friend of his saddle. It was halfway into the afternoon and they were well south of Pandora City. It had been a cloudless and hot little party from the get go. He rode his big black horse, Nitie, a mare with a fine temperament and disagreeable name.

The creature’s powerful shoulders quivered like flexible granite between Judd’s tortured thighs as the beast navigated the stones and rocks that littered the uneven ground.

The sheriff was looking for an old bangero path he knew from his days with the Red Riders. It wound in and around the rocks and ridges east of the Greenbelt Trail. The bangeros used to be as bad as the Savages until the first General Carmine and the Red Riders hunted them right to the door of Gramma’s Place.

That was a canyon halfway along the Western Mountains near a pass that opened to the desert and sea beyond. It took some special knowledge and luck to get right to the hideout where the bangeros holed up.

The stories said the General had talked to Gramma himself, and threatened the old veterano’s Wolfpack with extinction if they didn’t desist in their banditry and follow fairplay laws within the Territory. They struck some kind of deal, and so the large-scale raiding stopped and the bangeros were free to enter the towns so long as they kept the peace.

It was rare to see them though, since the Wolfpack spent most of the time mounting expeditions to the dead places along the west coast where they looked for exotic treasures of the world gone by. Smaller packs broke off to thief from time to time, and it was from chasing those groups that Judd had learned the secret paths.

Anything was better than the Greenbelt Trail.

The Greenbelt Trail sauntered to the south rarely straying far from the straightest line possible. Ironically, it was the trail’s isolated location that made it passable at all. The same Savage tribes who would violently oppose the passage of travelers were sore pressed to survive the arid lands themselves. It required some serious war-magic to stir them up enough to ride into the middle of that desolate place where the desert started.

As the trail left Pandora City it wandered through stands of cottonwood and willow, grass-tufted hillocks and parched riverbeds. Halfway through the day, the trail tended to keep a straighter course as the scrubland got harder, the trees spread out and the grasses grew spiky and windblown.

When a horse started kicking up sand instead of dirt, a traveler found himself in the most dangerous location because the Savage tribes tended to attack and harass at the edges of the raw lands that made up the 160-mile stretch of hell that was the Savagelands.

The Savagelands were misnamed for that reason, since the tribes were just as threatened by its harsh conditions and tended to make their homes in the mountains that girdled the Territory on the east and west.

It was said that the Savages were best suited for the worst conditions, but it was also well known that they weren't stupid and would take a grassy trek around a desert if the option were open.

So, at the northernmost border of the Savagelands you were likely to be murdered by the Irawk who had their homes in the forested mountains in the east, or the Apa who ranged in the foothills of the Western Mountains with parties traveling north to Plentyboats and south as far as Gramma's Place and the Greenbelt.

If you were lucky enough to make it across the Savagelands and found the first freshwater pools, grasses and trees that bordered the Greenbelt, you were also primed for attack from southern groups of Irawk and Apa, and if you were particularly unlucky, you'd run afoul of the Cheyokee tribes. They were the fiercest defenders of the Greenbelt, and it was their long blades that killed many a cattleman as he slept.

The Cheyokee kept the closest watch on the Greenbelt and defended its herds. They lived in green mountains on the northeast of the grasslands, and were masters of tracking and stealth.

Of the tribes, they had been the hardest for the Red Riders to whip, and some said that they never were beaten, choosing instead to fade into the grasses and count their losses. They recognized the General's taste for apocalypse.

Boto was going on about it. He rode a few yards to Judd's left.

"You see, Sheriff, it's a classic replay of history. Though this time in all fairness, since there were few history books to learn from, it is understandable that we'd repeat our mistakes," the hermit said with a laugh as he puffed on a cigarette he'd just twisted. "It's like Custer. It's Manifest Destiny." He chuckled, squinting into the sun. "But even that goes back to biblical times, and weeps through all of history. One people expanding over the bodies of the less technologically advanced."

"See you lost me there," Judd said, nudging Nitie a little faster.

"Maybe the saying should be: 'Forget history! If you're human, you *will* screw up so don't fight it.'" Boto looked up at the sky and laughed.

"My mother always said if you don't keep your eyes on the ground, you're bound to trip on your face," Judd added, flushing slightly as he remembered the loving, broad-cheeked woman. She died when he was a boy, so his memory of her was dim.

"Your mother was a philosopher in good company then," the hermit said, turning in the saddle. "Many an active mind pondered all of life only to come up finally with that very little thing. Life is being responsible for how you're being what you are. Focus on that, and you're less likely to go massacring innocents."

"Lost me again, Boto." The sheriff drew his horse to a halt and stared into the distance. "God I hate this place." Close to the old bangero trails the land rose around rocky and worn down hills, but it was an elevated stretch to ride and gave a broad view of the approach to the Territory.

"No sign of the Ironmine Outfit?" Boto stood in his stirrups and gazed through the shimmering heat.

"Nope," Judd answered, eyes roving over the horizon.

“You reckon they made it to the ruins?” Boto asked sheepishly. He knew it was a sore point for Judd.

The sheriff grumbled.

Pandora City wasn't always the last stop before entering the Savagelands. Fort Gregory had been built some 50 years before, and figured prominently in the Last Expansion that ended with its fall.

The ruins were 45 miles south of Pandora and overlooked the Savagelands from a rocky rise.

Judd Elliot was 22, and a private in the Red Riders when he was first stationed at Fort Gregory; not all that long after the powers that be came to realize that the army dowsers had been wrong about the location. They blamed a long wet spell for masking the fact that its wells were shallow, and drained a thin water table that was wholly dependent on frequent rain. Within the first ten years of occupation drought dried them up, and left the fort reliant on supply lines from the north.

The Savages knew of this and harried the water wagons.

When the *new* General Carmine started his Expansion of the Territory across to the Greenbelt, no one but the Savages knew it was to be the *last*.

The wild men had joined tribes to form an army. The Apa and Cheyokee met the General's divided forces in the east and west.

While the Irawk attacked Fort Gregory.

Of the 225 men and hangers-on at the fort, only a hundred survived, Judd and some officers among them.

The Savages killed the rest, burned what they could and left it dead.

Judd got a medal and special promotion to staff sergeant, started drinking hard and was discharged after a few dark years.

“Hard to say,” Judd said, pushing the thoughts of that burning night aside. Nowadays, cattle outfits used Fort Gregory as their driving point, forcing their herds across the Savagelands with the hope that they could water their parched animals at the ruins' undependable wells.

Judd and Boto wouldn't see it. They'd soon angle southeast to make the Harrison Place.

Mention of the fort set Judd's nerves on edge. He was already expecting a Savage ambush and he had no wish to ride into battle with Boto. As entertaining as the hermit could be, he was poor comfort when it came to serious things like gunplay and bullet wounds. Looking over at the man, the sheriff wondered again where he'd come from.

Judd had been sheriff five years when Boto first wandered into town with a pack mule loaded with skins he planned to trade in the north. He ended up trading them for drink and stayed in Pandora.

Boto denied up and down that he had any Savage blood in him, though he was always quick to point out, the Savages had the blood of many races mixed in since the new beginning: “Well, Sheriff, it's true, their Old Solomon was of First Nation blood like many of the wardens in the wood—but the survivors they led into the wilderness needed the skills of the native more than they needed his blood. The end result is *the Savage*.”

He was always saying things like that. Talking like an expert about things he couldn't know.

But Judd always attributed the strange allusions to a peculiarity of the hermit's mental disturbances. He drank a hell of a lot and the liquor might very well of shook something loose. And it didn't help that any time a person got too inquisitive about Boto's heritage, that the fellow began with his strange stories of times before, of life when things were different.

In short, he avoided the topic.

Judd was almost sure that Boto was a man of Savage lineage. Except for the curls in his thick hair, and a rather small and wiry frame, he looked an awful lot like one of the people of the tribes—Irawk maybe since some of them were a darker and leaner type. The hermit had coal black hair, and his skin was chestnut brown. His nose was long and prominent, jutting far out from his cheekbones. One time he claimed to hold a striking resemblance to Alpacino—a Savage name if Judd had ever heard one.

Boto rode beside the sheriff at a distance of some ten feet, on the back of a brown and white mare he called Scooby. The hermit wore a tall beaver skin top hat. The dark, worn stovepipe looked uncomfortable under the blazing sun, but Boto had assured the sheriff that covering up in the heat was a 'Bedouin' trick that kept a fellow's moisture in during the day and warmed him at night.

The sheriff chalked that '*bedoon*' reference up to more clues of Savage heritage.

Boto also wore an old deerskin tunic that closed up the front with a wide belt at the waist. He wore a loincloth of Apa design. The braided garment hung between his legs where his fringed leather leggings stopped at the top of his thighs like riding chaps.

"People didn't know what they were missing," Boto had said of the garment. "Nothing like cool air in the basement."

He carried a big pistol, the likes of which Judd had never seen. The hermit did not go about armed other than carrying a long skinning knife on his belt, and so he had to retrieve the gun from one of his *hidey-holes* whenever he needed the big black heavy thing.

The sheriff never got more than a glimpse of the odd weapon. Boto kept it in a sling holster that tucked up under his arm inside his tunic—the kind of setup favored by gamblers.

If the hermit was queried about it, he was likely to misdirect with one of his riddles: "I'm more of a traveler than a wanderer, Sheriff."

But Judd had always had an interest in puzzles, and he knew there was more to the hermit than just *crazy*. Some of his raving matched up with what the sheriff had heard Miss Teacher and the Preacher go on about.

They were always going on about something.

The sheriff called him a hermit for no other reason than Boto lived alone, somewhere in the hills northwest of Pandora City—when he wasn't in a jail cell or sleeping it off in an alley.

"I got a hole to hide in," he had explained. He also said he hunted and trapped when he needed money to purchase supplies. "How many energy bars can a man take in?"

Boto had jumped at Judd's suggestion of a ride down to the old Harrison Place. The sheriff splurged and brought along two bottles of White Oak Whiskey for the overnight stay at the end of the trail.

Neither of them could get into any trouble drinking down there in the wilderness.

Or so he hoped.

They rode on for hours, and were soon into the sun-baked flats, rolling dirt hills and dry riverbeds that skirted the first long miles of the Savagelands. They had sauntered well east of the Greenbelt Trail by now, so alternately switched on and off what looked like banger paths as Judd found them winding that way. He decided they were safe enough to use because he had such a hard time finding them.

Judd's mind kept coming back to the wounded Rider. He was starting to regret his decision to let him stay another night. *At least he should have waited for the fellow to leave.* He was a rough-looking customer, so it startled the sheriff that he'd trusted him. *Looks can be deceiving.* He thought about the way the townspeople looked at *him* and wondered if that had colored his decision.

A movement caught his eye. Ahead of them, where the ground was hilly, he had seen something move in the space between standing rocks atop a rise. The sheriff hissed to get Boto's attention and pulled his rifle from its scabbard.

Boto followed his gaze as Judd nodded toward the rock-littered hill.

"Saw something," he whispered.

Boto wrestled his horse's reins, shaking his head at the beast. "She's caught wind of something."

"You go that way." Judd pointed to the east. "I'll circle and come up to the top from the south. Then we don't shoot each other."

Boto pulled his pistol and worked it between his hands too fast for the sheriff to get a glimpse. There was a *click-click* and a metallic *clank* and then Boto rode cautiously away through the scree. Judd started around the hill to the west.

He wasn't ten yards from the top when Nitie stumbled on loose stones sending a small but noisy avalanche rolling. Straining to keep his rifle pointed at the hilltop, Judd whipped around and saw three vultures lift into the sky on ragged wings.

The sheriff groaned, "Something's dead."

Nitie lurched to the top in three bounds. Boto, strange gun in hand, rode up the other side. Something on the ground caught the hermit's eye and drained his face of color.

There was a circle of heavy stones a foot tall on the top of the low hill. They were irregularly shaped and paced around to form a small enclosure about ten feet across.

In the center a man had been tied to the stones by wrists and ankles. The rawhide thongs looped around the granite. The tension pulled at the fellow's extremities suspending him in the air.

The man had suffered before he died. His fingers were cut off, *and* his toes. A quick glance showed that he'd been castrated too, with something dull, and his stomach was torn wide open. The sand under him was stained black. The hot sun was turning his skin to jerky.

"Well, that's a bad end," Boto grumbled, looking at the corpse. "Been here a couple days, would you say?" He looked up at the vultures. "Those buzzards should have ate him up before now."

"Unless them what did it was still here," Judd growled behind his moustache, pulling his hat brim down to shield his eyes. The sand around the body was windblown, but he made out the partial crescents of unshod hooves.

"I'd say it was Apa. Irawk would have burnt him up." Boto winced. "They're afraid of being followed by the body." The hermit strained his eyes to the west. "Strange they'd come this far east."

“Them buzzards took his face. We’ll never know who he was.” Judd pointed at the ground with his rifle. There was a torn woolen sock by Nitie’s hoof. “That ain’t no Savage footwear, so he was a man of the towns.” Judd rose in his stirrups and scanned the nearby hills cursing under his breath. The geography hid too much.

“All these years.” Boto looked away, his face wrinkled with disgust. “I’m always impressed by the *creativity*.” He pulled at Scooby’s reins. The mount had been skittish since he arrived. “Who did it then?”

“Lord,” Judd sighed, his heart sinking. He pointed to the north. “I reckon *them*.”

Boto turned to see.

Five Savages mounted on sturdy horses stood atop a rise.

“And I reckon you’re right about them being Apa.” He recognized the eagle feathers decorating their lances. Irawk used Wild Path offerings for that.

A plume of smoke exploded from the group—something hissed in the air—then there was a *bang*.

“Where to?” Boto pulled hard on his horse’s reins, turning the mount wildly—it pawed the air.

“Can’t go back,” Judd snarled, sighted along the barrel of his rifle. He squeezed one off, and then clicked his tongue with disgust when he saw a plume of dirt fly up ten yards short of the Savages. “And they’re out of range. They got five guns, and these damn hills are too low to defend.” He cast around, feeling panic begin to scream behind his eyes. “We’ll have to run for the Harrison Place. There’s a well, and I think there’s a cellar... It’s our only chance.”

“That’s an hour off, or more.” Boto’s face paled with realization.

“If we stay ahead of them, maybe we can catch our breaths in a defile or valley. We just got to stay ahead of them and get there first. Damn!” He turned his horse to the south. It reared momentarily, smelling his fear. “Let’s hope *we* got fresher mounts.”

Judd cursed himself for thinking he could just go larking into the Savagelands with a couple bottles of White Oak.

“Damn!” He kicked Nitie’s flanks. The horse plunged down the hill. Judd knew the chase would likely kill the animal.

End of the *Fifth Horseman* sample.

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